

GCN

THE NATIONAL QUEER PROGRESSIVE QUARTERLY

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GABRIEL ROTELLO'S

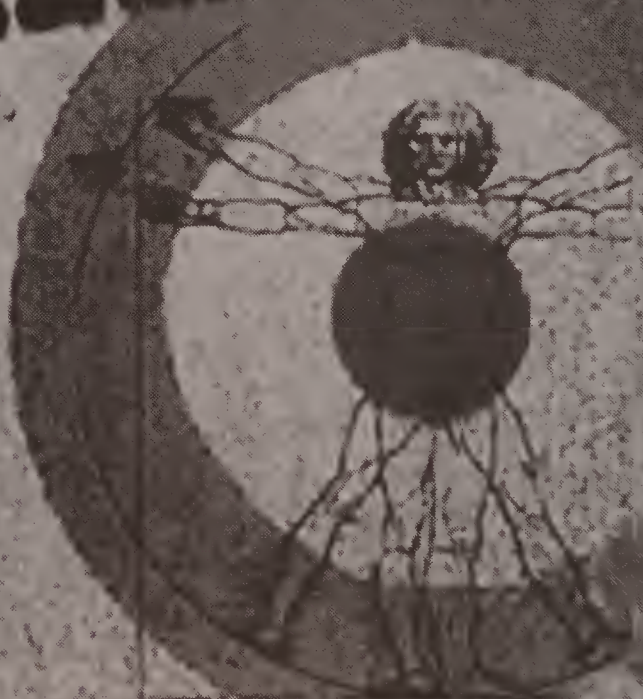
SEXUAL

ECOLOGICAL

ALSO Talking with:

1997 Lammy Award Winner Achy Obejas
Theater Director Abe Rybeck
Novelist Christopher Bram
Third World Organizer Rinku Sen

Cerullo Speaks Out on "Family Values"





The national queer progressive quarterly

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BSEF Board News

Thanks to all of you who have called, written and contributed financially in response to the newly redesigned *GCN* format. We are pleased with the changes and very excited about the difference we believe it will make to reader accessibility and wider distribution. However, the costs of everything, from printing to mailing, have increased and we have expanded our print run to make *GCN* available to more of you. Please, if you received this copy of *GCN* at a free distribution site, consider subscribing. If your subscription is winding down, please renew. We depend on the support of readers—like you.

Queer Politics: It's Never Been so Sexy

BSEF is thrilled to announce the first gathering of the Queer Progressive Organizing School (QPOS), scheduled to take place July 4-6 on Cape Cod. While this is a Boston metro event, we hope it will be one of many such schools across the country where queer activists working in a variety of community settings will come together to teach, and learn from, one another. We plan to discuss our political and cultural work, to relax and hang out together, to begin the process of building relationships across the many lines of difference that divide us, to provide some hands-on skill oriented workshops, and to strategize the creation of a strong public, progressive (sexy) queer presence.

The school will draw on the talents of many local presenter/participants. As well, we are pleased to feature several participants from other areas of the country. Elias Farajaje-Jones from Berkeley, California will inspire us with new imaginings of our queer future. Graciela Sanchez of the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center in San Antonio, Texas will discuss the difficulties and possibilities of creating diverse community organizations. Karen Bullock-Jordan and Naria Bullock-Jordan from Chicago will lead some red-hot "sex in the movement" workshops.

Curious? Enticed? We hope you'll join us. For more information and application materials contact Jen Douglas, 262-6969.

For our national readers, stay tuned. You will be hearing more about the school and its outcomes in the fall issue of *GCN*.

Queers and Class: Let's Get Down and Talk About It


Thursday, June 12, 7:30pm

The Boston Living Center

**Featured speakers: David Becker,
Susan Moir, and Carmen Vazquez**

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Urvashi Vaid's column will reappear in the next issue.

Queer Politics: It's Never Been so Sexy

Come to the Queer Progressive Organizing School (QPOS)

**July 4-6, Craigville Conference Center,
Cape Cod**

A place for activists, old and new, to come together, relax, talk about our political and cultural work, get acquainted across the lines that often divide us, get hands-on skills training, and strategize together to create a strong, public and progressive queer voice in the Boston metro area.

Featured Guests:

Elias Farajaje-Jones, on imagining our queer futures

Graciela Sanchez, on building diverse organizations

Karen Bullock-Jordan, on sex in the movement

Naria Bullock-Jordan, on more sex in the movement

Space is limited, deadline for applications is June 10
For more information and application packet contact:
Jen Douglas, 262-6969

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With the support of the Gay and Lesbian Communities Funding Partnership/The Boston Foundation, the Haymarket People's Fund, the Out Fund of the Funding Exchange, and Resist

to the editor

Dear GCN,

The shift of the magazine format makes a ton of sense, for both display and marketing purposes. A few tweaks here and there are needed, especially some well-placed lines to more clearly demarcate the editorial content and the advertising, but the package looks great. I must admit, though, that I wish the title, *Gay Community News*, was displayed more prominently. The GCN acronym is fine, but it doesn't really describe what the publication is, or what it is striving to be. *Gay Community News* does.

Some random reactions to the latest issue. Suzanne Pharr's book, *In the Time of the Right: Reflections on Liberation*, sounds very good. A reemphasis on liberation as our goal, multi-issue politics, and an injection of class issues and economic analysis into queer political discourse are all very welcome. I'm also glad she speaks out against stereotyping and dehumanizing the ranks of the right-wing; we did this way too often in WHAM!, as did other reproductive rights and AIDS activists. One thing I should point out, however, is that the distinction between "economic exploitation" and "oppression" is neither unique to Ms. Pharr, nor in fact new, which is the impression I got from your reviewer. I don't know if it originated with Marx, but I certainly remember it as fundamental principle (if that's the right word) of my education in Marxism, Trotskyism and socialist feminism.

... I appreciated Urvashi Vaid's defense of identity-based organizing, but I think it needs to be recognized that some activists and organizations have been able to successfully meld socialism and class analysis with an emphasis on the critical, first-rank role of the specially oppressed. Also, the deliberate construction of the unscientific category of "race" was exposed by the great black sociologist O. C. Cox, among others, long before the development of critical race theory.

Trying to tie together all my thoughts about my reading yesterday—GCN and *The Internationalist*—I fear that Ms. Vaid's prescription of coalition politics for a new progressive movement could serve to limit us to purely reformist gains. Coalition organizing across class lines is absolutely necessary to win reforms in the US, since working class-led united fronts have traditionally been

far less common and far harder to organize here than in many other countries, both developed and developing. But as necessary as they are for daily survival, the kinds of reforms she mentions are often temporary and fragile. Too often, we are forced to fight and refight a battle we thought over and won, often at the expense of forward progress on other fronts.

Charles K. Alexander II
Albany, NY

Dear GCN:

In her review of *Perfect Enemies: The Religious Right, the Gay Movement, and the Politics of the 1990s*, Sue Hyde rightly criticizes Chris Bull and John Gallagher for focusing on big-name Washington "players" to the exclusion of the grassroots activist whose work is ultimately more important. Unfortunately, she makes the same mistake herself in discussing the religious right when she declares Ralph Reed's "rank and file" to be her "enemies." As Suzanne Pharr argues in *In the Time of the Right: Reflections on Liberation* (also reviewed in the last GCN), it is a serious mistake to stereotype and dehumanize grassroots conservative Christians. They, like us, are to a large extent outsiders in American society whose lives have been damaged by the corrosive effects of global capitalism. As Pharr and others who have organized against anti-gay ballot initiatives around the country have discovered, it is perfectly possible to engage in respectful and productive dialogue with such people. To name just one example of such necessary dialogue, lesbian activist Bonnie Tinker has a popular call-in show on a Christian radio station in Oregon that she uses to explore common ground with people whose values and life experience are very different from hers, while making clear that scapegoating lesbians and gay men will do nothing to solve this country's problems.

Martin Heggstad
Trumansburg, NY

Dear GCN,

I am in receipt of [Vol. 22 #4]), and thus feel compelled to reply to your article on transgendered ads [Queerying the News] specifically the question you pose to the reader, "What do you think?"

At first impulse, I'm inclined to agree with GLAAD, that it is in poor taste, but I feel the issue is a much deeper one than that.

It's important for us to remember that a major corporation like Holiday Inn will do whatever it thinks it has to do, confined only by what laws there are, to make a profit. The very nature of a corporation is that of greed: profits.

As such, the use of a transgendered person is neither to our benefit, nor our harm, as LGBT people. Our reception of such an action, whether we place too much emphasis on it, or not, is a matter of importance.

As of late, we have ennobled people who are lesbigay and in the limelight to the degree that our society ennobles such people as O. J. Simpson, even to the point that while he was driving around at a slow pace, we were dramatizing the incident as a "chase," and people were chanting with the fervor of religious zealots: "The juice, the juice!" over and over.

Regardless of gender issues, such unrealistic glorification of an individual or corporation, is quite out of line. Either we pick a person (such as Ellen DeGeneres) or a corporation and attribute to these people the overstated ardor in the manner of our straight counterparts. Yet, what have we gained? How has this changed our lives, if at all? Are we less hated by homophobes? Are we less discriminated against? Do we have all of our rights, as working, tax-paying, voting American citizens, thanks to any actor, actress, or corporation?

It is, indeed, our desperate grasp to claim those things, that is the truest of harm for us. In so doing, we lose sight of the much needed incomplete work that is ahead of us.

Sincerely,

Mr. Robert D. Meek, Jr.

South Carolina

GCN welcomes letters. Please try to keep letters to less than 400 words. We will cut sections, for brevity, as we did with Mr. Alexander's letter.

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BOSTON 1997**

Dennis Poplin



“TRUTH?
YOU CAN'T HANDLE THE TRUTH.”

“We are just like you.” It sounds like the first words spoken by an extraterrestrial.

6

Queer space—the final frontier. The locale where queer behavior is allowed, appreciated, perhaps safe, and possibly flourishing. Antiqueer space is, of course, the opposite. Out of the closet /in the closet—the archetypal Queer/Antiqueer spaces. One is positively charged and the other negatively charged—like matter and antimatter. Like Superman and Bizarro Superman. Like Xena and Callisto.

Antiqueer is not necessarily straight. Queer and antiqueer sometimes collapse into the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered body politic.

Flashback: Two years ago, after a large San Antonio police sting operation in a favored gay cruising area, the local newspaper printed the names of men arrested for public lewdness in a small article inside the Metro section. One closeted man killed himself after his name appeared. His family sued the paper for wrongful death, and local queers got the paper to revoke its policy of printing the names of misdemeanor defendants. Last year, a local television station staged a ratings sweep event by taking a hidden camera into a park restroom and taping oral sex between two men. The story was titled “Perverts in the Park.” During the hurriedly edited segment, the pixilation wasn’t quite complete. As a result, a blowjob was broadcast on the five o’clock news. Straights objected on anti-pornography grounds; gay conservatives objected that the story was homophobic and a negative portrayal of the gay community. Later that year, a “gay internet prostitution ring” was broken after another San Antonio police sting operation. This was front page headlines for three

days running. Names and addresses of all the arrested men were printed. Local media were taken along by police as they arrested a college student on his way to class. The same group that protested the previous police and media operations said nothing about these men or this action.

When regional and national queer media picked up the “Perverts in the Park” story, they mirrored the local conservative gay response that the story was a negative portrayal of gays. Three rationales/defenses were given: 1. police entrapment—the officer made them do it. 2. unequal enforcement of public lewdness laws—straight people were not targeted for stings. 3. the men in the park are victims of homophobic repression.

The last one is the most interesting defense. They didn't mean the police action was repressive. These groups meant that those men were having sex in the park because homophobia drove them to it.

The theory went that if gayness was accepted by straight society then there would be no reason to go to the park to find partners. You would find lovers like "normal" straight people do. And, presumably, then settle down in a monogamous relationship. Queer sex in public places was presented as a pathological response to society's bigotry.

The suicide of the arrested man fit perfectly into this theory. He was presented as a deeply closeted man without access to out gay communities and, therefore, driven to the park for furtive, anonymous and shameful sex. So shameful, that once it was made public by a homophobic newspaper, he was driven to kill himself.

This same attitude plugs into marriage arguments. A gay man recently told straight politicians that city approval of "gay marriages" would help reduce new HIV infections—because public acknowledgment of committed gay relationships would promote and foster monogamy. This translates into: "We are normal; therefore, normalizing our normality will make us even more normal."

Do mainstream queer activists actually believe these behavioral theories or do they feel there are

Queer sex in public places

was presented [by gays] as a pathological response to society's bigotry.

some things that straight people shouldn't be told? It seems that conservative lesbian and gay politicians and organizations distance themselves from lesbian and gay behavior and culture in order to gain and maintain political access. No elected representative will attend the banquet of an organization that defends the right to public sex environments. Normality has become a political strategy. Like Jack Nicholson said, "Truth? You can't handle the truth."

"We're here, we're queer, get used to it," has become, "We're gay, we come in peace, don't be frightened."

"Just Ellen?"

In the Ellen Degeneres coming out spectacle, news accounts were filled with Ellen's normality and, by extension, the normality of all lesbians and gays. She(we) is (are) the "girl-next-door."

On MTV, in AP wire stories, and in local and national news media, young and old lesbians and gays declared their apparently universal belief that Ellen is the perfect spokesperson because she is so normal. In more than one story, queers commented that "not all gays are

weird." During Oprah Winfrey's hour interview with Ellen, Oprah twice repeated her belief that the majority of gays are not like the "gays in the gay Mardi Gras parades." Forget queer, Ellen's not even a lesbian—she's gay. In *Time* magazine and in her Diane Sawyer interview, Ellen said she doesn't like the word "lesbian" because it "sounds like a disease." Ouch. As much as I love them all, this single statement made me wonder, "When Ellen, k.d. and Melissa get together, what do they talk about?" With my friends, after movies, gossip and sales, we eventually get to the meaning of our lives, our politics, and the way we think of ourselves. The word disease as a descriptor never comes up. In the coming out episode, when asked if she wants to be called gay or lesbian, Ellen replies, "Just Ellen." In fact, the word gay is used almost exclusively, except to describe a coffeehouse. Is that normal?

Ellen has repeatedly declared that she is not an activist. She doesn't want to carry a banner. I respect that. BUT, this is a woman who created perhaps the largest media mobilization in queer history. She dominated the press for

Dennis Poplin

months, turned America upside down, and freaked out the Religious Right—along with some corporate advertisers. With the full force of Disney/Touchstone, ABC, and Oprah Winfrey behind her, Ellen pushed her personal/professional coming out into an event much larger than the 1995 March on Washington. One-third of all televisions in America tuned in to the episode—not to mention the “20/20” interview, the “PrimeTime Live” interview, the cover of *Time* magazine, *Ellen* viewing parties, local and national news and on and on. And she isn’t an activist? This is Ellen’s retreat into normality. After this extraordinary event, the political meaning of her coming out had to be obscured. Gay activists aren’t normal.

For some reason, it is not seen as politically expedient to declare our differences—whether in appearance, values or sexual behavior. Men can’t be viewed as in the park to have a good time—free from homophobic repression—or in resistance to that repression. To all the

queers I saw declaring their lack of weirdness I want to ask, “Who’s going to the baths, the clubs, the internet chat rooms?” “Who’s buying and downloading all that porn?” “Do you think your parents and your boss think that’s ‘normal’?” “Do you think that gay men who participate in those forms of sexual culture are ‘perverts in the park’?” “Do you see them as freaks or victims?” “What is this normal?”

I believe the internet escorts arrested and publicly exposed were not defended because they were commercial sex workers. No mainstream group was interested in figuring out a defense for “whores.” The police park raids were to “make the place safe for families.” In the midst of internet sex hysteria, the web-based escort service was busted to clean up the ‘net. There is no safe place for proud queer sex. Not in the parks, not in the media, not on the ‘net. If it’s non-monogamous, anonymous or multi-partnered, it isn’t acceptable—even in some lesbian and gay communities.

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Homophobes have a clear sense that we are different. That is the basis of their hatred. Mainstream queer insistence to the contrary sounds forced and desperate to me. We are normal in relation to what? Can the queer and the Antiqueer co-exist? I feel normal and I know I am different. And I still don't know what normal is.

When the circle is drawn around normal gays, who is left outside? If Ellen is normal then what is RuPaul? It's as if we think of ourselves as aliens from another planet trying on disguise. At what point will we or can we admit that we have our own lives and cultures? After all the laws we want are passed? A collective national distrust of individuality, difference and diversity is playing out in our queer organizations and in our own psyches. We play to that same fear in straight people when we invoke the politics of normality.

So, what happens when the queer and antiqueer battle for the same ground? Supposedly, when particles of matter and antimatter meet they annihilate each other. "Truth? You can't handle the truth."

Dennis Poplin is a member of the San Antonio Lesbian & Gay Media Project. He also works as a youth organizer on issues of sexual health and reproductive rights.

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A LESBIAN PARADISE

Achy Obejas

The Clash of Cuban American Cultures:



Talking with
Writer Achy Obejas
about Her Life and Work

by Kris Kleindienst

Achy Obejas is the recipient of the 1997 Lammy Literary Award for her novel, *Memory Mambo*. Her collection of short stories, *We Came All the Way from Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?*, has been praised by Oscar Hijuelos and Dennis Cooper. Her work appears regularly in the *Chicago Tribune*, *Windy City Times*, *The Nation*, and *The Advocate*. She has received numerous writing awards and teaches writing at Columbia College in Chicago. She is currently a cultural writer for the *Chicago Tribune*.

Achy was born in Havana in 1956. She describes her family as "headed towards middle-class;" her grandmother was a seamstress, her grandfather a railroad conductor. Her mother worked as a teacher and social worker. Her father, a law student at the time, got involved in anti-Castro counter-revolutionary activity that caused tension between him and Achy's mother. For a time, Achy and her brother lived with their grandparents in the interior of Cuba.

In 1963, she and her family left Cuba by boat, bound for the US like many other Cubans. After spending about a year and a half in Miami, which is basically a required residence for all Cubans, they moved to Terre Haute, Indiana.

KK: How did you wind up in the Midwest?

AO: The government of the United States has a policy of trying to disperse immigrants so they won't congregate in large groups.

Right now the US is dealing with Iranian and Iraqi immigrants, trying to relocate them to places such as Arkansas rather than let them congregate in New York or Boston where they have more organic communities. When we arrived in the US, the government was concerned about the convergence of too many Cubans in South Florida. They had prepared what they called "transitional programs" that put Cubans in oddball places like Iowa and Wisconsin and Indiana. The idea was to mainstream them into American life. My parents got into one of those programs at Indiana State College to become teachers in the US. In the mid-60s there was a teacher shortage. My mom got a job in Michigan City, Indiana. There was one other Cuban family there, but they had emigrated pre-Fidel, so naturally they were pro-Fidel. That meant that my father wouldn't let us talk to them which left us alone in the

town. It was ridiculous. Of course, that meant that the son, who was more or less my age, immediately became my best buddy.

KK: How did your family find community?

AO: In Michigan City, it was not easy because of the scarcity of other Latinos. We had some friends from Peru. Eventually the Latino community in Michigan City grew substantially. Many years after I left, the community became mostly Mexican and working class. What we did have growing up was contact with Cubans in other towns around Michigan City. There were three families in LaPorte, two in Hammond, one in Munster and one in Chesterton. Every weekend we would all get together at one of their houses; the guys would play dominoes or poker and the women would congregate in the kitchen and yak. The kids would run around and wreak havoc. All of these people eventually became sort of aunts and uncles. To this day there are people in the world I call *tia* or *tio* who are no blood relation whatsoever, but come from those times.

The "Fidel Hate Thing"

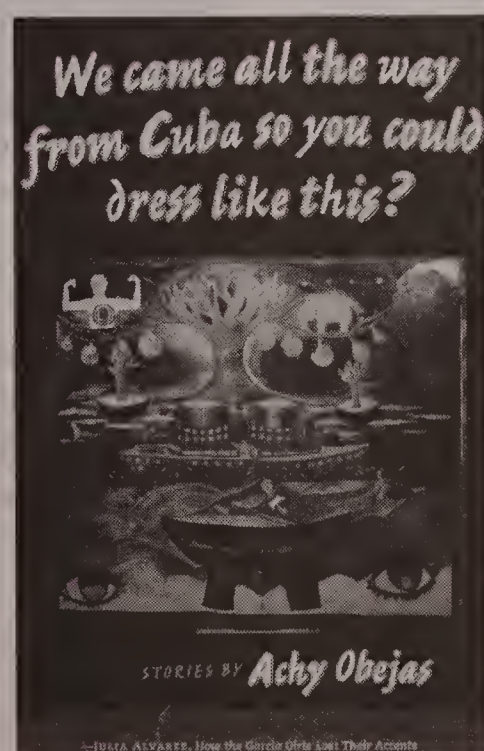
KK: You've talked to me before about the virulent anti-Castro politics of the Cuban American community. Have those politics affected your work?

AO: Actually, it's never affected me in the sense that I would censor

In terms of watching a society change, I imagine living in Cuba now would be like living in Eastern Europe...just before the fall of the Berlin Wall, and then...being there immediately afterwards to see the two worlds colliding.

what I write. I don't identify with anti-Castro politics at all, although it had an affect on my first book, *We Came All the Way from Cuba So You Could Dress Like This?*. Cleis Press, my publisher, put together a terrific book tour. But, if you're Cuban American, you haven't graduated into the big leagues until you do Miami.

I read at Books and Books in Coral Gables which is a great bookstore. I really loved the irony of reading there. When I arrived, I



discovered that Barbara Bush had read there the night before, which I thought was great. These people really have diversity down.

The other bookstore where I was booked to read is *Librería Universal* in Miami that is Cuban-owned and considered fairly progressive. The people who run it are friends of my maternal grandmother.

At first, when we called them up to book a reading they were very excited and happy. Then they got the book. The first book is a collection of seven short stories and only one deals with Cubanness. It's not especially political in the sense of taking a strong position, but of course, that's exactly the point. You're expected to take a strong position and the fact that I didn't deal with Fidel and Cuba as principal points of departure really rattled them. They cancelled the reading.

Initially, I assumed that they canceled the reading because of the gay subject matter and that maybe they were trying to not embarrass my grandmother. So I called them up and said, "Is it the gay thing?" And they said "Oh, no no no, we don't care about the gay thing, it's that lack of the Fidel hate thing."

I think that view in the Cuban American community may be on the verge of changing. There's a younger generation, people in their twenties and thirties, who've come of age in the United States, whose lives are in the United States and who are not, like our parents, either overwhelmed with nostalgia

Achy Obejas

or in any way projecting a life in Cuba. We project lives in the United States.

KK: Mariel has changed some of that.

AO: Yeah that was a big, big change. Prior to Mariel, the community had a tremendous sense of itself as golden—very successful, very anti-Castro, very homogeneous in many ways, although it wasn't entirely any of the things it projected. To a certain extent, the US government aided and abetted those images. Then Mariel happened. It was a very different exodus. It was mostly male, much darker, and a significant proportion of the people who came over were gay. They were very young. The average age of the Mariel people was 24. They came over in large numbers, altogether around 120,000-140,000. It was a generation that had grown up in Cuba under the revolution so their take on things was not as black and white as the folks already living in Miami.

The earlier waves of immigration involved folks who were mainly economic exiles. The gay folks were coming here for issues of liberation and their notions of what being free and being queer meant in the US. Of course they were disappointed.

The American government aid programs changed dramatically after Mariel. Pre-Mariel, almost any Cuban who washed up on shore got asylum and amazing amounts of government aid, way beyond any other immigrant group. With Mariel, those policies were rewritten.

Mariel was the first exodus of the new generation that made it really clear that the revolution has had a permanent effect on Cuba and Cuban culture. The nostalgia that the earlier exiles carried then bumped up against a very different reality. People just weren't leaving Cuba for the same reasons.

KK: How interesting that US sponsorship would dry up with the arrival of poor, black and gay immigrants.

AO: Right. Of course it was in part because of who the newer immigrants were, but it was also part of something larger, the American turn against immigration and immigrants—e.g., the awful proposition in California

[Proposition 187] and the dramatic increase of Asian-bashing in the US. But the anti-immigrant momentum, for the most part, has focused on the darker peoples.

KK: You've spoken before of the impact on the arts and cultural scene that the Mariel people have had.

AO: They came from a country where you have to be very wily to make things happen. Not coincidentally, immediately after Mariel, the Cuban government started putting pressure on Cuban artists leading to a dramatic exodus of Cuban artists—not just to the United States but to Spain, France and Mexico. Suddenly, you have these other people in Miami who transform the face of Miami with galleries, theater groups, and a general revitalization of abandoned areas of the city.

For example, pre-Mariel Miami Beach and the entire art deco strip on Ocean Blvd. was nothing, just little crumbling hotels. Miami Beach was where Mariel immigrants could afford to live precisely because it was crumbling and hideous. Many younger gay men relocated in Miami Beach and began to slowly rehabilitate the area. Little cafes cropped up where they began performing their music. A new community emerged, culturally and geographically separate from the older community in Miami.

This is not to say that Miami is in any way progressive. Just last month there was a horrible incident involving one of the local Cuban radio stations. They had decided to play artists who are still residing in Cuba; that led to a series of bomb threats. The station then decided to revise its policy. They spent weeks on the air declaring that they were no longer playing artists from Cuba, declaring themselves absolutely anti-Castro.

Writing *Memory Mambo*

KK: Speaking of self expression, could you talk about how you came to write *Memory Mambo*?

AO: It was a circuitous route. I really started *Memory Mambo* because I was contractually obligated to write a novel. When I signed on to publish the book of short stories, one of the conditions was that I would write a



novel. I never imagined that I would ever write a novel. I couldn't imagine sustaining that much focus on anything. I'm 40, but I'm really mentally of the MTV generation. I have no attention span whatsoever. I asked my agent, "Do I really have to write this?" She said, "Yeah!" So I started to write to see where it would take me. I had an idea of a story, I just didn't know where it would go or if it would eventually become a novel.

KK: You had some specific influences, as I recall.

AO: Yeah. I reread a lot of the novels that I really love

and ended up using two novels for different reasons—primarily as foundation and inspiration. One is *Bastard Out of Carolina* by Dorothy Allison. The other is *The Palace of the White Skunks* by Reinaldo Arenas.

I loved the structure that Dorothy had. But when I met her at the San Francisco Book Fair and told her that I was using her book as a structural model, she was horrified. She said, "Oh no no no! There are some real problems with it. Here, let me tell you!" She sat me down and started scribbling on a napkin, and told me about how all these chapters in the middle had terrible problems. She was the sweetest, kindest, most supportive person.

I used *The Palace of the White Skunks*, a completely fantastic, surreal novel, as inspiration. Arenas was part of the Mariel exodus and committed suicide in '93.

KK: Was he gay?

AO: Yeah, he was gay. Most of what he wrote was very metaphorical. On the one hand, that is how one writes in Latin America; on the other hand, that's how one writes under a dictatorship, and the habit stuck. But in his later years, he wrote quite openly. His last book, a memoir called *Before Nightfall*, is extraordinarily explicit and is even more fantastic than his novels. It provides an incredibly horrific and surreal glimpse into Cuban life. He has a voice that I love—hypnotic, trance-like, and very, very circular. I knew Reinaldo; I met him and we talked almost telepathically. He was very important to me. I read bits and pieces of *The Palace of the White Skunks* every day before I sat down to write.

KK: When reading *Memory Mambo*, I didn't catch the influence of *Bastard*. I think you have contributed your own unique voice.

AO: I think what happened was that I used it initially for structural influences, and then it broke down. In *Memory Mambo*, unlike *Bastard*, time is fragmented which is typical of the Latin American novel, although I don't claim to be writing a Latin American novel. Time goes back and forth; it's not a linear novel in that sense. *Bastard* is, which is one of its strengths. It's almost like a heartbeat.

Achy Obejas

KK: *Memory Mambo* as I read it is not exactly a coming-of-age novel because the narrator is 24 years old when it starts. But in a way she's a young lesbian, reluctant to grow up, surrounded by a wonderfully eccentric family and having to make a lot of decisions in her life. She's a lesbian, but the novel is not driven by her need to figure out her sexuality or to lay a heavy trip on her family; it's part of the fabric of the novel. Was that conscious?

AO: That was absolutely deliberate. I can appreciate a good coming out story, but maybe I think they've been written. Right now I'm not the least bit interested in the coming out process.

KK: I really like the fact that you have a lesbian in the context of her family life. I haven't seen too many books trying to do that. One of your criticisms of current lesbian publishing is that it is full of mysteries taking place in Northampton, and we don't know any women like this.

AO: Well, I know very few women who spend all of their time in a lesbian environment. A lot of lesbian literature that I've seen in the last few years reflects a very insular community—to put it in less kind words, a very ghettoizing community.

I had a wonderful conversation with Terry de la Pena, who wrote *Latin Saints* and a number of other wonderful lesbian books. Her books involve Latinas who have a lot of family contact and who tell a lot of family anecdotes. We asked each other: Why does this happen? Why do we do this? Terri just cracked up and said, "For God sakes, we're Latinas; we can't escape our families!" I think to some extent that might be true. Culturally we're defined by our families. In *Memory Mambo*, Juani doesn't just function in the world as a lesbian. Mostly she functions in the world of her family. Her community is her family. This is typical of many Latinas.

KK: Perhaps a sense of family is one of the contributions to gay and lesbian literature that Latina/os are making. *Memory Mambo* is not an autobiographical novel, is it?

AO: No no no. The family in *Memory Mambo* is very Catholic, very working class. They came in the late 70s. My parents were teachers who came in the early 60s. We're not working class; my family religious background is animist and Jewish. I didn't grow up in Chicago, although I've been here almost 20 years. The novel takes place almost entirely in Chicago.

KK: I loved that about it too. The more midwestern lesbian and gay literature is, the better as far as I'm concerned. What also struck me about the book was that the central tension between Juani and her girlfriend, Gina, was that one is Cuban and the other Puerto Rican.

AO: There are different prisms. The tension between Cubans and Puerto Ricans pre-dates the United States. For starters we were liberated from Spain at the same time, but Cuba became essentially free and Puerto Rico became a colony of the United States. I think that gives Cubans a tremendous amount of arrogance. But again I emphasize that we were nominally free. The first president of Cuba received his checks from the US Treasury Department. I think that in the States the tension gets underscored because of racism here and a perception by both groups that the other group has it better. There is no question that Puerto Ricans in the United States have privileges that other Latinos do not have. They're US citizens at birth. There's also no question that Cubans have received extraordinary amounts of aid compared to other immigrant groups.

At least in economic terms, Cubans as a group have done better than almost any other group. Those who came here from Cuba in the 60s, unlike those who came later, included many professionals. The relationship between Cuba and the United States was practically incestuous prior to the revolution; big Cuban millionaires had nice little savings accounts in the States.

KK: Do you ever think about returning to Cuba?

AO: I think it would be fascinating. I can't think of any other place in the world right now that I would rather be. In terms of watching a society change, I imagine living in Cuba now would be like living in Eastern Europe

in 1987 or '88 just before the fall of the Berlin Wall, and then being there immediately afterwards to see the two worlds colliding.

There's an embargo on Cuba right now, but that embargo has to lift eventually. In the meantime, the country is going through some amazing societal changes. There is quiet, unspoken preparation for what comes after Fidel. I don't know how much of it will come about. There's a lot of maneuvering. If I was employed by CNN, I would have been the first applicant for that CNN bureau job in Havana. Unfortunately, CNN is the only American news group that's been given a license by the US government to operate out of Havana, so the rest of us can only watch with envy.

Kris Kleindienst is a bookseller and writer living in St. Louis, Missouri.

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Queer Culture

in the Making

by Adrian Saks

For many years, Abe Rybeck has been an important part of Boston's queer theater and activist communities. Rybeck, in 1989, created The Theater Offensive, a queer theater production company, where he is the Artistic Director. As we sat down for this interview, Rybeck was rushing to make last minute changes to his latest play, "Dirt," that opened, May 30 at the end of The Theater Offensive's annual *Plays At Work* series.

AS: I know The Theater Offensive developed out of work you were doing with an activist group called The United Fruit Company. Exactly how did that happen?

AR: I wasn't one of the people who was saying, "We have to do this." I was saying "Oh no, another meeting?" I got dragged kicking and screaming to the first organizing meeting of United Fruit Company, and then I ended up dragging, kicking and screaming ever since. Mostly drag-ing.

The very first demo was against the US war in Central America, that was raging at the time. I was scared that it was going to be boring, so the night before I jotted down a sketch and talked to a few of the other guys who were not planning on getting arrested.

It immediately grew into other kinds of work as well: anti-racism work, some early pro-union work—we did some work on the Coors boycott, which was a focus of union and queer organizing. We came up with the slogan "Coors gives bad head." Then AIDS

activism. My favorite thing that we did back then was the *Hunks of Nicaragua Calendar*. You might say it was a deconstruction of the hunk calendars that proliferated in the mid-eighties. We thought if we are trying to speak to gay men, what could be more faggot-y than appropriating the cultural phenomenon of these hunk calendars? You know, "Carlos is a soldier in the Sandinista army, and he can't cum all over you until he overcomes the Contras." We passed them out late at night at gay bars and, at the end of the night, there were never any *Hunks of Nicaragua Calendars* littering the sidewalk.

AS: And how did that develop into The Theater Offensive?

AR: Here we were, a gay male activist group with a wing that did guerrilla theater. It was a collective, and none of the people involved, including myself, ever dreamed



Members of the cast of Abe Rybeck's play *Dirt*: Adam Morris and Youguen Kushi

that we would be doing theater as the main thing in our lives. But I started really loving it and getting fascinated by how effective we could be in community building. People seemed to yearn for it. I had been drawn to it to avoid my own boredom with political organizing, and that struck a chord with other people, too. Still, it was hard to sustain all that, and I thought there had to be some way to take this energy, expand its meaning and give it enough stability for it to survive.

I wanted to work more with lesbians. I was really interested in being more adventurous, doing more outreach and working with people who had less experience in the progressive gay and lesbian movement, which was overwhelmingly white. I bounced these ideas around with a lot of people.

AS: What were the trade-offs in creating a more stable organization?

AR: It's been a constant struggle, it wasn't just at that moment when we went from United Fruit Company to

The Theater Offensive. We are bad boys and bad girls doing this funky work. Every step of the way we get better at what we do. Part of that is a growing professionalism, which is important, but also strange. There's much responsibility that comes with establishing yourself. Providing people with diverse, radical queer culture—it's not as if there are many places to do that. With the formation of The Theater Offensive, it upped the ante on our responsibility to the community.

The Dirt on "Dirt"

AS: So, tell me more about "Dirt."

AR: It's about insider gay politics and housecleaning. I first conceived of it as a long sketch United Fruit Company could perform; that must have been in 1989. So here I am eight years later racing to finish the final draft of the script.

"Dirt" takes place in the home of the mayor's liaison to the gay and lesbian community. I chose that site as a

theatre

battleground where our agendas fight themselves out. We've had a victory that there's an office called the Mayor's Liaison to the Gay and Lesbian Community. Now that sounds as though their job is to serve the gay and lesbian community, but that's not who they're employed by. They're employed by the government, and they have the job of keeping the support of the g/l community and making sure there's no trouble. I'm glad there's a mayor's liaison; it's not that we shouldn't be working in that arena, but it's a dirty arena, like many others. So, maybe if we appreciate and recognize that, instead of pretending the world doesn't work that way, our struggles for liberation will be more meaningful. That's what "Dirt" is about.

AS: When I saw the workshop production at the Institute of Contemporary Art, it reminded me of several local scandals and bits of gossip that I did not know you were aware of.

AR: It's been fun hearing people's reactions. So many things have happened that I never knew about, yet they parallel what I wrote. Many scandals don't get out. Everybody I talked to about it said, "Oh your inspiration for that must have been so and so." It's been fun that it hits home for so many people's experiences, but more than that, it has been terrifying. It's horrifying that there is such a high level of bullshit in our community that doesn't get named. Naming it is not an unhealthy thing at all. Our movement is at a time in its development where it is really important to critique our work. In some ways I feel that we've already missed the boat on that. We've made some enormous strategic errors.

If we're asking to be given rights, who's giving them to us? Where do these rights come from? We have to fight for recognition of what is already ours. Our rights and our liberation are not anybody's to give us. We have to live them. The strategies that we choose are about arranging

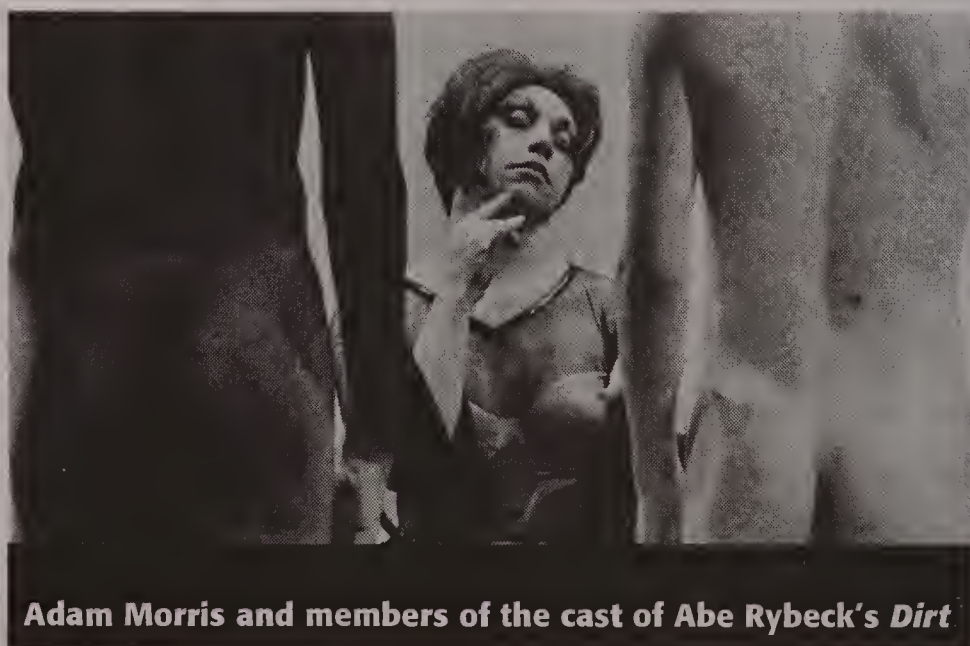
for a convenient victory for a portion of our communities. "Dirt" is about who has a place at the queer table. If we are going to have victories, who are they for? It's been a middle class movement, so many of the people doing the organizing feel entitled to liberation, but the irony is that they think the reason they're entitled to liberation is because they have a good job.

I hope that the work we do has some political effect. Building queer culture is a political act; we name it, some don't.

AS: Tell me about The Theater Offensive's Teen Theater Works.

AR: We do a lot of different things with the program, but the heart of it is the residencies. We go into schools or community centers and bring together a team of kids who are interested both in queer subject matter and the craft of creative theater. We work with them to build skills. We teach them practical ways to create theater about their experiences with queerness and homophobia—how they interact with all aspects of their lives: family issues, school issues, racism, sexism, gender issues. It's been interesting to see the genera-

"I want a **life** that's about
exploring the depths and
variety of my **desire.**"



Craig Bailey © 1997

Adam Morris and members of the cast of Abe Rybeck's *Dirt*

tional shift in the values of queer liberation. Most of those warm my heart.

AS: Such as?

AR: The most gratifying is that they really challenge the sticky problem of labels that has always been so important to the gay and lesbian movement. What if I'm fifteen now, I can tell I have desire that is beyond what society expects me to have, and I want to spend the rest of my life finding out what all that desire can be about? I don't want to spend the next ten minutes labeling it and then stop. People have said we should make ourselves more palatable to straight people by presenting the easiest parts of who we are. I think this impulse to say, "I want a life that's about exploring the depths and variety of my desire!" is the opposite of that. It's a way of saying, "Let's take the most adventurous part of queerness and see what is universal about that." Straights could get that—no matter how defined or conventional their sexuality may be.

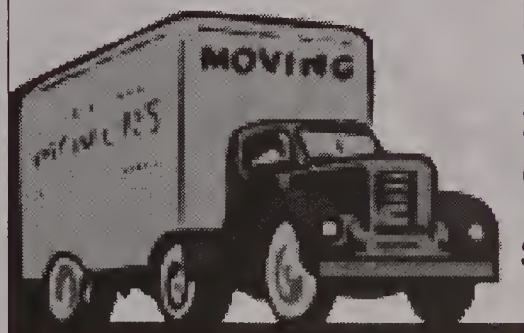
AS: And the disturbing part?

AR: I think our generation inherited a movement and now is handing over a market niche. What these kids are growing up with as being gay or lesbian is more a fashion statement than a movement or adventure. Our efforts to define who we are have backfired in some ways because we've allowed our emphasis to be on, e.g., work in the legal arena. I think it's extremely important work, but any law that grants us rights is really about naming the limits of our rights. Anything that says we have equal rights in these areas is by its nature saying that in these other areas we don't. Are we really fighting for laws that say the Catholic Church has the right to discriminate against us? Do we want to encode that in law? It's not in the kids' spirit to accept that, but it's what we're handing them as a movement.

AS: This fall The Theater Offensive will be putting on another season of "Out On The Edge." When you are programming, do you worry about what is out on the edge enough?

AR: When you have a company called The Theater Offensive and a festival called "Out On The Edge," the

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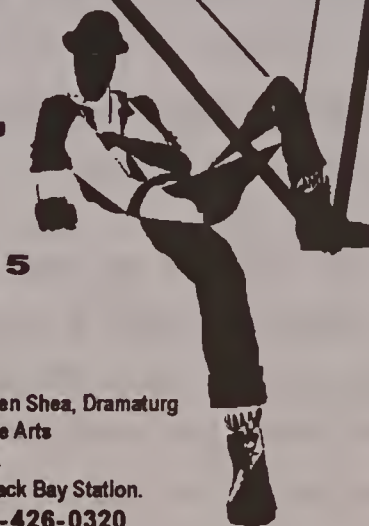
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audience that comes is one that wants to be challenged. They often want to be affirmed, to have fun, but they want to be challenged. A big reason is the chance to be in a room, in a creative atmosphere with folks from your city with whom we don't have enough opportunities to be together. It's an exciting experience for people, and I love that.

Adrian Saks is a local writer and activist. He is co-editor of *Revelations: Gay Men's Coming Out Stories*.

Christopher Bram

Gossiping

WITH CHRISTOPHER BRAM

By Christopher J. Hogan

20

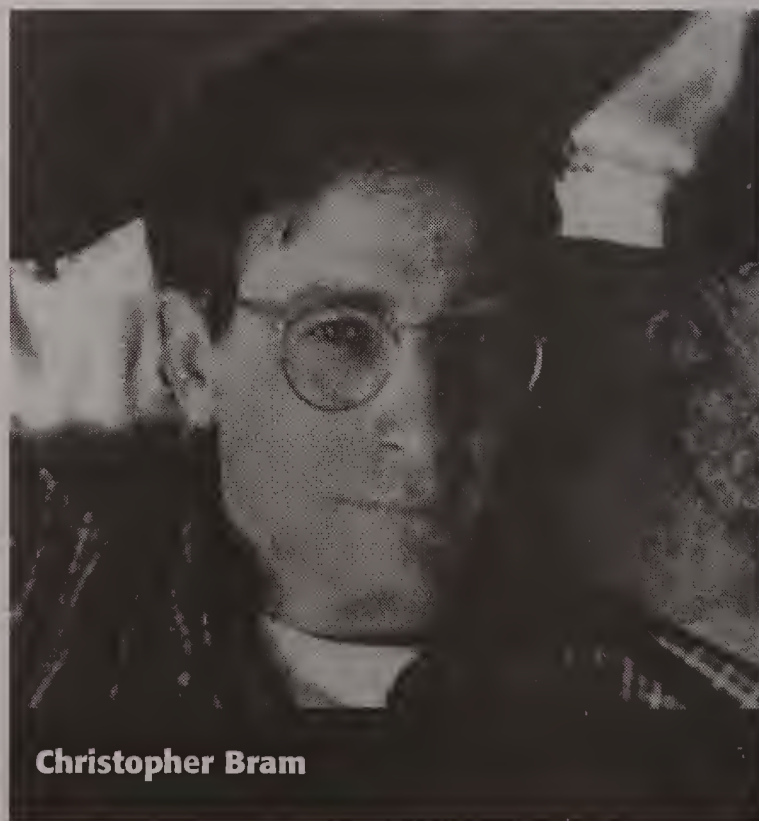
Christopher Bram is a popular gay novelist and critic who has published six novels, each written about a different historical period in the 20th century. His latest novel, *Gossip*, came out in April and is set against the political backdrop of the recent past—1992. Prior to our interview, I asked Chris to think about the meaning of gossip to the gay community.

CH: I thought I'd start off with the question I asked you to think about—what you think the role of gossip is in gay culture? We can talk about that, or we can start more specifically.

CB: Oh, let's start more specifically.

CH: Okay. This isn't the only gossip in *Gossip*, but in the book characters speculate about which celebrities are gay. Why do you think that has remained such a hot topic among gays and in gay gossip?

CB: Oh it's fun. Actually, this ties to the general question of the importance of gossip among gay people. Gossip is important to everyone. It has a special importance to gay people because there were so few references—until



Christopher Bram



recently—in the media, in print and television, to who was gay. You don't even get the "so-and-so divorced their third wife this month" type of coverage. It's completely secret, so gay people have to share what they know with one another. It makes them feel connected to the world at large. Also, part of the appeal is that you're not sure if it's true or not. It's half imagined. It's not necessarily a hard, cold fact. That makes it like writing fiction. It's kind of like a communal fiction project.

CH: I've never heard it discussed that way. I'm sure you've heard the argument that it's interesting to find out which celebrities are gay because the gay community needs role models. That leads one to wonder why we are looking for role models who are closeted.

CB: When gay people talk about celebrities who are gay, it's not out of a need for role models. There's a bit of dirt—a bit of a bite to it. It's fun. It's good to know something that the established media isn't telling you.

CH: Do you remember the first "he's gay" or "she's a lesbian" rumor about a famous person that you heard?

CB: The first ones I can think of are from when I moved to New York in 1979. Those are ones I can't repeat.

CH: I'm not looking for certain people, so much as what you thought of it.

CB: I first thought "Wow." Then, that was just the first of many. After that, you're constantly hearing "this writer is gay, this journalist is gay," and so on. Now, in the past five years, we've had a lot of these people actually come out and say, "I'm gay."

CH: What has this meant to you at different points in your life? I think it changes as you get older.

CB: When I was twenty-six, I had just moved to New York and had barely come out myself. At that point, to find out that there were gay people in positions of power was heartening and exciting. Within a year of being in New York, I found out just how many people in important positions are gay. Then, I began to be not angry, but annoyed or irritated about all those people in the closet.

CH: In *Gossip*, a lot of this discussion takes places over the Internet. Do you use the Internet? Do you go into chat groups or web pages?

Christopher Bram

CB: No, but I have friends who do. For the book, I would pick their brains, or I would look over their shoulders.

CH: How do you think the use of the Internet has changed gay gossip?

CB: It has just sped it up. It has just accelerated it, and it has added new dimensions to it. You can now download nude pictures of Brad Pitt. Basically, it has escalated an activity that was already going on.

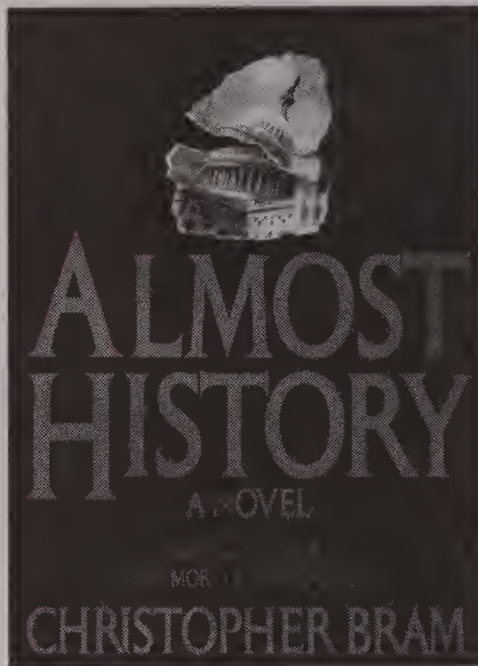
CH: Have you seen the “nude pictures of celebrities” that are quite clearly photos from *Playguy* with Kirk Cameron’s face pasted on?

CB: I saw the Marky Mark one, and that did look suspicious.

About Gossip

CH: Your work often features either DC or Hollywood, the two centers of gossip in the US. What material do they give you?

CB: In Hollywood, gossip is fairly harmless. It has a purely entertainment value, and it doesn’t have any direct political results. It has some indirect and subtle political consequences, but no direct ones. In *Almost History* and *Gossip*, it has political effects. Bill O’Connor, a gay Republican, comes out in *Gossip*. He finds he has succeeded with the Right by aping their attitudes towards women. He really wants to please them and does. He



writes a misogynist book about Hillary Clinton and an imaginary cabal of feminists and lesbians that he claims secretly run Washington. This benefits his career. It has negative political results. On the other hand, he’s very uncertain. There’s some glimmer of conscience deep down inside Bill. He feels bad about being in the closet. He chooses both a self-serving and inappropriate time to come out while he’s on television. Shortly afterwards, he’s found murdered. What, in one way, is silly personal tittle-tattle ends up having political effects.

CH: What struck me about Bill’s coming out is that while it has dire ramifications for him—as dire as ramifications get—the media, when covering his death, doesn’t dwell on his coming out as a scandal. Had the novel been set in another era, it would have been a scandal.

CB: No it’s not, and you’re right that in an earlier time it would have been a hot, salacious, juicy

tidbit. Now, we’re aware there are gay people everywhere. We’re not just a vocal political minority. That makes people uncomfortable. They can’t treat homosexuality in and of itself as a dirty joke, so they don’t know how to treat it. They become skittish about it. They don’t want to talk about it. As a result, the coverage of Bill’s death kind of disappears in the media.

CH: Not to be too clichéd, but it was interesting to be reading about Bill’s coming out during the *Ellen* hullabaloo. The media wasn’t necessarily trying to make that salacious, but there was a lot of hype. I felt most people had this “who cares” attitude about it. It wasn’t as big a story as the media was pushing.

CB: The strange thing about the marketing of *Ellen* is that it was a marketing scheme. Even straight people who were sympathetic resented the way her coming out was being sold as a product. That’s part of the problem with the media in general. There’s this thing they call “synergy” which seems to be just a conspiracy to make all of us think about the same thing for the same five minutes before they move onto something else. Corporate America will saturate us to death with a single thing at a single time, and in the weeks leading up to Ellen’s coming out it was that. You can’t help but resist it and reject it because you know you’re being sold. Okay, yes,

I did watch the show. I was pleased to see that it was genuinely well done. It was actually well-written, and funny, and well-acted.

Focus on Film

CH: That was a relief to us all. The last thing we want is people thinking that homosexuals can't make good television shows. In some of your novels, there are a lot of film references. Certainly, *Father of Frankenstein* is full of them. Why do you use movies as a recurring theme?

CB: I love movies. In fact, movies were my first love before fiction. When I started writing, stories would come to me and I would think of them as film scripts, but I would think, "Oh, go ahead and write it as a short story." A film script doesn't really exist until you film it. Stories have an existence of their own. Over the years, I have realized that I liked writing the stories far more than I ever would making films. It's easier to do. I can write what I want. I like the independence. I have to admit that I have a vegetative temperament which is good for a novelist but terrible for a film maker, but I still love movies.

Hollywood Takes

CH: In *Father of Frankenstein*, you feature a film director and—to some extent—a minor celebrity of the thirties. One of the most interesting aspects of that book is that he is known as a homosexual in Hollywood which caused very little scandal during his career. Do you think there was an unspoken "as long as you're discrete" policy in Hollywood at that time? Is it still in operation?

CB: Whale's career ended in 1941. At that time, Hollywood was—well, it still is—a very small community. There was no way you could keep a secret. During Whale's career, unless you were arrested, the newspapers just wouldn't mention it. It was just too salacious. This was the same whether you were an actor or a director. Gore Vidal's joke was that the director was "the brother-in-law." Directors were not important then the way they became after the studio system fell apart.

Corporate America will saturate us to death with a single thing at a single time, and in the weeks leading up to Ellen's coming out it was that. You can't help but resist it and reject it because you know you're being sold.

It was during the fifties that *Confidential Magazine* started to run stories on who was gay and effectively destroyed several people's careers. Before then, the studios didn't care as long as you didn't get arrested, and even then sometimes it wasn't a problem. George Cukor once got arrested. The studio managed to cover it up, but it wasn't important to them. It became important in the fifties particularly with actors and movies stars. Then, only slowly in the sixties and seventies it went back to a more laissez-faire attitude the way it was in the twenties and thirties.

CH: Writers and directors have always been held to a different standard than actors.

CB: The big fear for producers is that if women know a male movie star is gay they can't fantasize about him. It ruins the fantasy.

CH: Apparently, a Hollywood producer—a woman—recently said of Anne Heche that not only will she never have a romantic, heterosexual role again, but that she'll also never have another leading role. I guess the assumption is that all women's leading roles involve heterosexual romance.

CB: Yes, exactly.

Historical Fiction

CH: *Almost History* features a character in a similar situation to James Whale. I hesitate to call either of them "out" because they're not openly gay; they're actively gay.

Christopher Bram

CB: Yes, they are actively gay, and they both live in very large closets.

CH: Given you write “historical fiction,” how do you research how the historical contexts affect the characters’ sexuality and how it’s expressed?

CB: I imagine it. There’s some guess work. I have quite a few friends who are gay and who are older than I am—who are in their sixties and seventies. I also draw on personal experience in a different way. I was very slow in coming out. I didn’t tell people I was gay until I was twenty-two, and I didn’t go to bed with another man until I was twenty-four. I remember the strategies I would use with myself, the lies I would tell myself. Using those as the basis, I can imagine what it’s like for someone like Jim Goodall, the foreign service officer in *Almost History*. He goes through that period for about twenty years of his life. He doesn’t come out until his forties.

Political Thrillers

CH: *Gossip* really becomes a political thriller in some ways—as do *Almost History* and *Hold Tight*. None of them fit neatly into that genre, but they definitely have political thriller elements in them. What draws you to that genre?

CB: The main drive is that I want to be able to write about politics. I’m also a very plot-oriented writer, so I’m drawn to things that



help with that. I don’t really think of them as political thrillers although they have elements of that genre. It gives me a safety net for my work, so I can explore both the characters and the ideas I’m dealing with. Whatever genre I’m working with, I like to play around with it. I like to scramble it a little. My joke about *Gossip* is that it’s an anti-romance, anti-thriller, anti-courtroom drama. It has something to frustrate everyone. I feel that’s closer to real life. In life, things will begin and we’ll think “oh, I’ve seen this on TV” and then it will go off in an entirely different direction. Real life doesn’t lend itself to genre, but elements of genres do appear.

CH: One of the elements of political thrillers (although it’s not unique to them) is that the characters’ sexual desires lead them into danger. It may be physical danger, trouble with the law or authority. That’s a theme

that goes through your work.

CB: It’s more a function of storytelling rather than my belief that sleeping with someone will get you into trouble. It makes sex part of the story, but it’s also involving in itself. To me, it’s just one of the standard devices of story telling.

CH: Yes, it’s not unique to your work, but I think it allows you to put people in strange situations. Sex is an issue around which people often don’t think clearly when they make decisions.

CB: It’s definitely true with Ralph in *Gossip*. It leads him to make several really bad decisions. In *Almost History*, Jim Goodall winds up becoming semi-lovers with Imelda Marcos’s hairdresser, and he’s completely aware of what he’s doing and that the other guy is basically a spy. Jim feels he can use that to relay information to the Marcoses, but he ends up liking the man far more than he thought he would. That leaves him vulnerable to dangers from the Marcoses.

Audience

CH: Who do you think is the audience for your books? In *Gossip*, there seems to be an understood audience.

CB: I’ve given up trying to guess who my audience is going to be. I write for myself and a few close friends. If it interests me and it interests them, I feel confident that it works. I generally assume that

Bill O'Connor, a gay Republican, comes out in *Gossip*. He finds he has succeeded with the Right by aping their attitudes towards women. He really wants to please them and does.

most of my readers are going to be either gay themselves or very gay friendly. That's all I can count on. I would like to think that straight people would be drawn to my books depending on whatever subject they are interested in. If they are interested in Hollywood, they would read *Father of Frankenstein*. If they are interested in contemporary Washington, they would read *Gossip*. Unfortunately, I think straight readers read next to no gay fiction. There are very few writers who have any sort of crossover, so I don't count on it.

CH: Given that there are political themes in your work, do you think that affects who your audience is? You can't assume that gays are left-leaning or liberal. *Gossip*, for example, is not too complimentary to the Right in general and specifically to gay Republicans.

CB: To be honest, I feel that I am writing for a small subset of the gay community, and that's gay people who read fiction. Beyond that, how my work will be read by someone who's left-leaning as opposed to right-leaning—I'm not really sure. I've given up trying to guess that too. I'm pretty left-leaning myself

but have been surprised by people who think I'm a neo-conservative because of some of the critical questions I raise. I like the fact that people who share my politics find Bill, in *Gossip*, not likable but sympathetic. They felt more kindly toward him than they anticipated. I was surprised by how much more kindly I felt towards Bill as I was writing as opposed to how I started out.

CH: In my experience, everyone knows there are gay Republicans, but they don't know any. It's how some straight people talk about gay people. I don't know if I'd call Bill sympathetic because he's a little psychotic—not that psychotic people can't be sympathetic.

CB: He behaves like a psychotic every now and then, but I don't think he's really psychotic. He's trying to balance these contradictions in himself, and he can't do it. It makes him do crazy things.

New Work

CH: He's a very interesting character because he has internal conflict, and I did sympathize with him more than I expected. What are you working on now?

CB: I'm about one hundred pages into the new novel. It's about a clairvoyant pianist, and it follows his career from the American Civil War to about the 1920s. The love of his life is a man who was a slave during the Civil War.

CH: This is a new historical era for you.

CB: Yeah, I haven't gone before the age of movies before. This is my visit to the nineteenth century which means I get to look at old engravings and daguerreotypes and color them in my imagination.

Film Version

CH: And the movie version of *Father of Frankenstein*, what can you tell us about that?

CB: It's got the green light.

CH: That's very exciting. Are you going to be involved in the writing?

CB: No, the screenplay was already written by the director, Bill Condon. I've read it and I really liked it. It's supposed to be really rare for writers to like the adaptation of their work. I like the director, and I think he's got a great cast. Ian McKellen will play James Whale. Vanessa Redgrave will play the housekeeper, and Clay Boone will be played by Brandon Fraser.

CH: That is a great cast. We're assuming that the housekeeper has had not a sex change, but a nationality change.

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Family Values?

Broadening the Debate

by Margaret Cerullo

Educational arenas, from schools to mass culture, have increasingly been challenged by the Right to demonstrate their support for “family values.” Often at the center of these challenges, what provokes the attack, are issues and concerns related to gay, lesbian, bi and trans families, youth, or teachers, but they actively target other constituencies as well. If we are to effectively counter the “family values” initiatives, we must locate our struggles and experiences as parents, teachers, and youth in the context of both the current conservative, explicitly anti-gay strategies *and* the larger political context, the larger political ether that is saturated by the discourses, or we could say crusades, on family values. When the Rightwing mounts a campaign against the recognition of queer families, queer claims to family, we need to ask: where does the Right get its power to define who we are and what our families mean?

Since the Supreme Court reversed the Colorado anti-gay referendum, Amendment 2, the Right’s strategy to go state by state with “No Special Rights” campaigns has been replaced by ones focused explicitly on gay family issues and queer presence in the

schools. They realized that issues involving parenting, marriage, our relationship to children, and our presence in the schools are the weak links in the gay freedom struggle. In 1994, according to a CNN/*Time* survey, 52 percent of the population polled thought “gay

lifestyles” were OK, but 64 percent opposed gay marriage and the adoption of children. Often you find that the same percentage of people who support our right to access to the marketplace (equal treatment in employment, housing, credit) oppose our right to children and our claim to family.

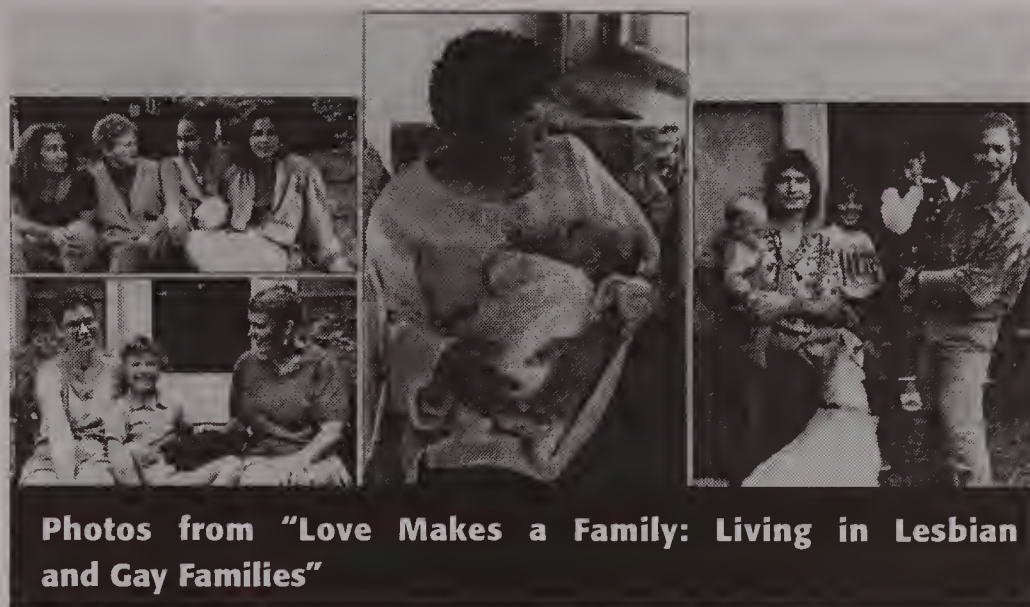
School Daze

The Right decided to move strongly on the local level on these issues, as well as keeping up a national presence. We see them most prominently in school board campaigns and around education issues—they’re relentless, well-funded, incessant, and they are everywhere—from small towns like Elizabethtown, PA to liberal meccas like Cambridge and Amherst, MA. They have targeted the National Education Association (NEA) because the NEA supports Lesbian and Gay History Month, openness, tolerance, anti-discrimination, respect for and recognition of diversity in

our public schools—the kind of things that will clearly contribute to the collapse of “western civilization” as we have known it.

What happened in Cambridge and Amherst MA that brought in the Rightwing? A photo exhibit, “Love Makes a Family,” a series of loving and moving photographs depicting lesbian and gay families. Model arguments were developed to oppose the presence of these photos in elementary schools, including inventive language like the suggestion that “the exhibit would *sexually harass* (my emphasis) students by creating an intimidating, hostile, humiliating and sexually offensive educational environment.” It is interesting that when we enter environments where we’re not wanted, we are represented as predatory and intimidating. Nothing unfamiliar in this inversion for minorities: when Black people, e.g., seek access to public space, neighborhoods they are not “supposed to be in,” to communities defined precisely by their exclusion, their very presence is deemed predatory and intimidating. Those who would discriminate are cast as victims of our “aggressive” demands to exist on equal footing.

Examples proliferate. In Brookline, MA, a teacher came out to her middle school social studies class and one girl was so upset she had to transfer to a Christian acad-



emy! (By the way, *her* homophobic parents teach in the Cambridge public schools.) When we claim our right to exist, to claim a public existence, there is an enormous effort mobilized to defend other people’s “right” not to know, to remain ignorant, clueless.

From Bryon Center, MI, recently, came a story of a music teacher who was discovered to be gay, leading some in the town to try to get him fired. Two fellow teachers, a guidance counselor and a technology instructor, sent videos to the parents of his students that depicted “gay sex acts.” Those teachers did come under censure, and he kept his job, but the School Board felt compelled to publicly condemn his “lifestyle.” Soon after these events, he died of a heart attack. These kinds of assaults are going on all over the country, some of them are well-organized, some spontaneous, all of them insidious and relentless.

But, then, there is the extraordinary story of Elizabethtown, PA

where the Concerned Women of America (CWA), in response to the NEA, submitted a successful School Board resolution defining the family—mom, dad, and kids, and committing itself to promote this definition in the Elizabethtown schools. As a result, 250 middle and high school students walked out of school protesting the attack on gays and demanding to know why the marital status of their parents was relevant to their education. These kids were threatened, told they would be suspended, and they still refused to give up their protest. The students lost after the School Board reaffirmed acceptance of the CWA resolution; but we know that the issue of whose families matter, and why, is alive and being debated in Elizabethtown.

The Rightwing is well-funded, sometimes well-organized, other times spontaneous, but when a Rightwing initiative surfaces, our concern must be not so much with the conservatives who produce

such initiatives, but with the fact that they meet receptive audiences, confused audiences and sometimes, like the kids in Elizabethtown, resistant audiences. Our task is to understand the dynamics that produce audiences receptive to their ideas, and how we can nurture more resistant audiences. We have not paid enough attention to what kind of soil their initiatives take root in.

Fashioning Our Response

The court challenge against same-sex marriage in Hawaii rested on arguments that tried to show that we, gay families, inflict damage on *our* children. (See Nancy Polikoff in Vol. 22, No. 3 of *GCN*.) If the opponents of the photo exhibit in Amherst proposed that recognition of our families harms other people's children through "exposure," in Hawaii, the argument was that we actually harm *our* children, children from "fractured families," when we don't offer them "a standard of stability and hope...We bring the standard down to a lower level rather than trying to elevate those who have not experienced good family life." This argument resembles the one presented in the welfare debate. It explains why social policy must attack illegitimacy—"illegitimate mothers" and their children—we bring them to a "higher standard" by refusing "fatherless families" the resources to survive; otherwise, we honor "fractured" homes. Here we see "family values"—the rhetoric and the practices it underwrites—in operation. In both cases, the heterosexual two-parent family is stabilized, normalized through the production of a "lower," outcast other. Our challenge is to resist this logic of normalization.

The rhetoric of "family values" is inventive and productive, always on the alert; it is like an octopus, reaching out at once against welfare here, queers there. Recognizing this points to the limits of fashioning our politics simply from the base of an "identity." We must think about how to defend ourselves, our families, our kids, our communities mindful of the entire political and cultural context of competing claims on what constitutes a viable family, a valuable family, a family that matters.

There are a number of pitfalls that we confront as we try to fashion our defense. One defense is the familiar

We have to agree among ourselves, make a contract with one another, that we will not defend our rights by demeaning and making inferior another group of parents or people.

argument of sameness: "Get over it, our families are the same as yours." Of course there are—somewhat depressing—ways in which our families are the same as theirs. Face it, it is equally difficult for those of us with small children to retain a vibrant sex life, whatever our sexuality. The routines of parenting are pretty much equally distributed across queer and straight families. Much more relevant than whether we are queer is whether we have money, how many people we are parenting with and with what social resources. Those are the issues that determine the meaningful similarities and differences.

Another example of the 'we're the same' defense is from the Unitarian Universalists who, in their consistent support for gay rights, recently issued a pro-gay marriage statement arguing that denying marriage to gays denies rights to fellow citizens, hard working, tax-paying citizens. But this implies that it would be OK to deny rights to immigrants or people too poor to pay taxes. I think those are not the terms in which we want to defend ourselves.

Another, opposite, claim is that we are different, better. On National Public Radio a few months ago, on the heels of the Hawaii Decision, a reporter interviewed a gay male couple with children in San Francisco. They emphasized how important it is to understand that gay and lesbian families are very different. When we as gays and lesbians decide to have children we have to think about it, plan carefully for it, take responsibility—not like those teenage girls who just go out and get (themselves) pregnant. Is it necessary to demean another group in order to make our claim?

This line of defense is exactly what some of us fought against when then Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis in 1985 ordered the removal of two small boys

who had been placed by the Department of Social Services in foster care in a gay male household; Dukakis thought gay households were inappropriate for children. The gay defense began as what we called the "white picket fence" defense. "Look what these gay men have to offer these children—they're employed, middle class, they can send them to good schools, buy them lots of toys"—in contrast, presumably, to their mother. The way this kind of defense comes forward is: "judge us not by our sexuality, but by our parenting skills," as if parenting skills were a function of character, rather than a reflection of the kinds of resources one has to draw on to parent with freedom and dignity.

We have to agree among ourselves, make a contract with one another, that we will not defend our rights by demeaning and making inferior another group of parents or people.

Creating Stigmas

Besides targeting queers, "family values" is the banner under which attacks proliferate against "illegitimacy," divorce, and with virulent intensity, welfare. The family values discourse is centrally an attack on women. It is a two-class, two-race attack. Middle class women are attacked for crimes of independence; they don't form families or they leave them because they are too obsessed with work—like Murphy Brown or Marcia Clark who might deserve to lose her kids because she was so obsessed with the O. J. Simpson trial. Poor women, on the other hand, are attacked for crimes of dependence—or, rather, as Katha Pollit put it, "They should substitute husband dependency for welfare dependency as God and nature intended." "Monogamous, heterosexual marriage is the best anti-poverty program," Dan Quayle told us, because it is a cure for "moral poverty." Recognizing implicitly that stable marriage systems have always depended on coercion and inequality (the higher women's income the more likely divorce), conservatives propose that we bring back coercion (Charles Murray, e.g., advocates "shotgun" marriages) and halt the tide of equality. Then, there's the "tyranny of fatherlessness," a recently articulated social problem, a "problem with no name."

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Reimagining Community:

Rinku Sen Takes Up the Challenge

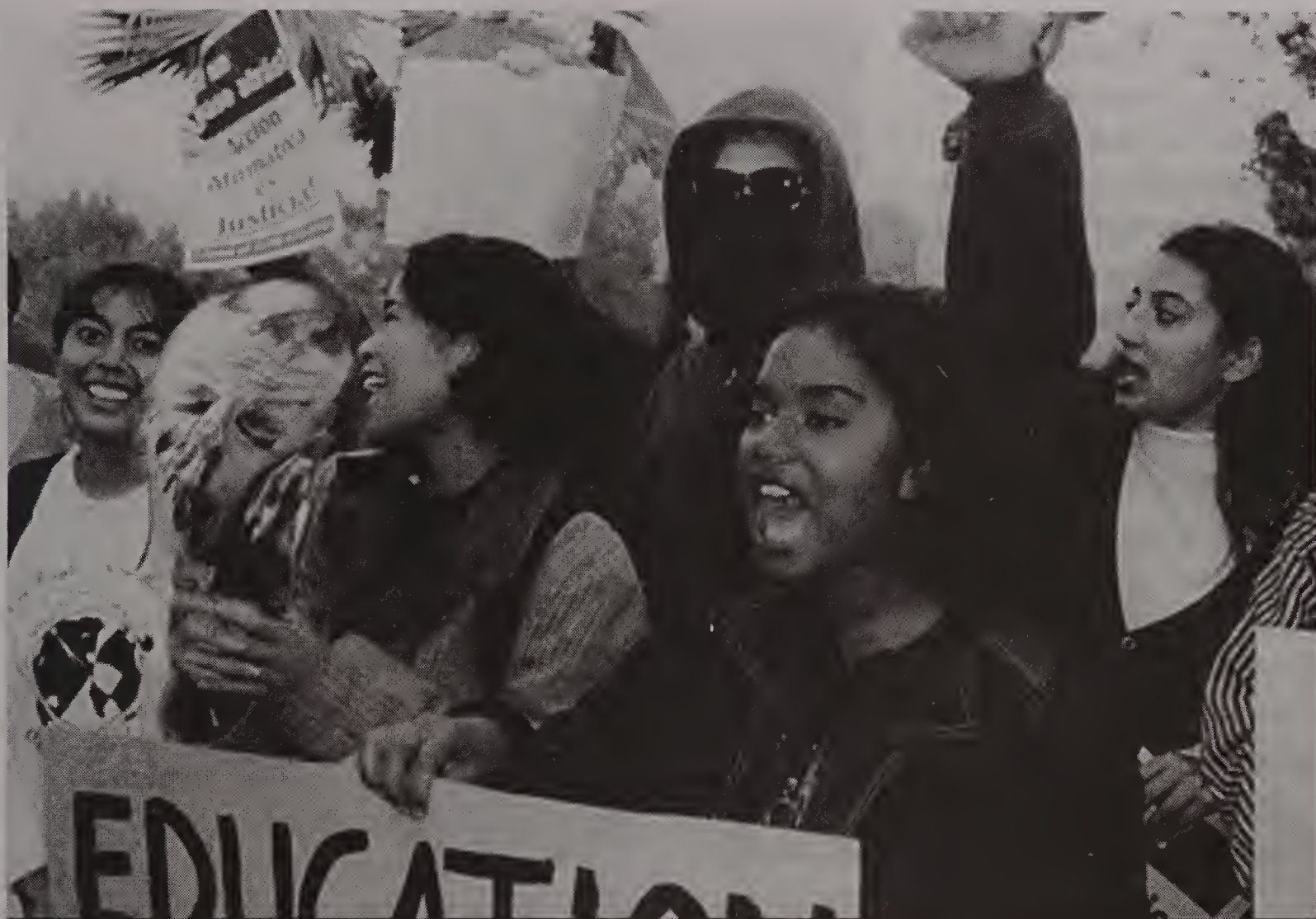
by **Stephanie Poggi**

Rinku Sen is co-director, with Filipino activist, Francis Calpotura, of the Center for Third World Organizing (CTWO). CTWO was started in 1980 as a racial justice organization owned and led by a multi-racial group of people of color. The organization started in a context where various white-dominated national organizing networks and their training institutes were not meeting the needs of people of color—in the training of organizers, in the choice of issues, or in how the issues were developed. With two overriding goals—furthering a vision of racial justice and fulfilling a vision of a multi-racial society that honors diversity and difference as a benefit rather than a detractor—CTWO set out to organize and train people and to collectivize movement work that was going on around the country, including starting a magazine, *Third Force*, that covers issues others do not.



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Rinku Sen



Participants in a Youth for Justice action at University of California Regent Glenn Campbell's home

Rinku is the Political Editor of *Third Force* and Program Director of the Gender Equity Program. She also consults with and helps train organizations. Here Rinku talks about CTWO's organizing models, how gender and sexuality issues have emerged, and her view of the Right, specifically related to initiatives like Proposition 209, the California anti-affirmative action initiative that passed last November and was enacted this Spring.

SP: What is distinctive about the Center for Third World Organizing?

RS: We are best known around the country for recruiting and

training young organizers of color. Two main principles guide our work. First, we are not nationalists; we're trying to build a multi-racial community within the organization and then fight for it in the world. Thus, we believe in sending people to communities that aren't their own, not because culture is not important but because a commitment to human rights and a vision of what community could be like supersedes our various identities. We might send an African-American organizer into a Latino community or vice versa. Many young Asians have been attracted to a multi-racial situation—that is

where they can find some political ground they couldn't find in middle or upper income Asian communities. The other principle is that it is important for people to get into the "field." In the field you spend a lot of your time working through ideas in a context that is about everyday life.

SP: When did you begin to create community organizations?

RS: Our oldest organization is about 8 or 9 years old—People United for a Better Oakland. We developed the core model and then set up an organization in Denver. The Denver organization has greater Latino and Native American

Rinku Sen

involvement. Depending on the region, we add something new or different to the principles and organizing model. The third group was organized in Portland, Oregon where we furthered multi-racial, poor people's organizing but with a gender analysis as well, thus emphasizing girls and women of color.

By being in these different locations we are forced to reconsider the model in light of local differences. We see ourselves as growing and changing, not just saying "we have something successful, let's just replicate it everywhere."

SP: Is there a reason that the gender issues were a focus in Portland?

RS: Our gender consciousness has been growing over time. A majority of the leadership and staff were women. I think that has to do with the traditional gender roles that women have been assigned in a patriarchal world that equips and forces us to take on the community building roles, to be key and primary advocates for our families. Because women do unpaid work as well as wage work, we have a lot of experience with both kinds of institutions. We live in patriarchal communities, whether we define it as the US or your block, and that limits our contributions. Thus, women clearly have to be concerned with how to overthrow patriarchy as well as racism, how gender roles and the idea of gender as a category affect peoples development as human beings.

I do know, e.g., that domestic partnership allows gays and lesbians to gain some economic and civil rights, but if we are concerned to expand the rights of gay people of all classes and races, then we have to know more about what we're experiencing, whom we're relating to and how. How do institutions think of all of us?

On the street that plays out in fairly common examples. We recruit women who come into the organization to fight around issues that affect their kids or their families. They achieve a level of leadership, institutional victories, and racial and economic successes. Then we lose those new leaders because their husbands become threatened by their increasing role outside the family and forbid further participation. We had many women leaders who at some point had to choose whether to hold on to their husbands or the organization. We're not going to replace that woman's family, so we have to think about what would make it easier for women to take on what is considered a traditional male role in their communities.

We have to be fighting for a society in which women can live

without humiliation and without having to give up themselves in order that others can have what they need. So we were driven by the needs of our leadership. We needed to recognize the discrimination women encountered in schools, at social services, and in the workplace, as well as the discrimination women face close to them in their daily lives. It is racial and economic and gender-based as well.

Confronting Sexuality

SP: Do sexuality issues come up?

RS: The rise of sexual liberation movements, anti-AIDS movements, queer recognition, queer identity movements definitely influenced us. We watched ACT-UP rise as a major contributor to direct action history, and took real pride in that. But mainly our imperative to look at any issue comes from within the organization. In this case, our base was young people of color attracted to organizing as a career option. We're attracting disproportionate numbers of queer people to our Minority Activist Apprenticeship Program. We had a growing group of people who had sexuality as part of their identity, at a time when that identity had political and collective expression. Out of the interest of staff and interns we began to look at those issues quite closely.

In highly interpersonal ways, we began to connect our low-income, people of color base to queer issues as well. For example,

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Youth for Justice 1996 Spring Break Caravan action at Beverly Hills Home Savings of America Bank

organizers came out to their members. We helped break through the staff's fear of coming out and members' fear that we were opening a Pandora's box that would split the organization apart. People had to confront their historic beliefs about "proper" sexuality.

Of course, the interpersonal only gets you so far. Over time these issues are taking on more concrete and on the ground forms. We traditionally hold a national gathering of women leaders and organizers. At the '91 gathering, we had leaders from our Oakland organization come. We had a discussion of how women are key organizers, yet we hardly ever look at the gender aspects of our situation and our work. This then led to a discussion of how many lesbians do this work, but rarely look at how sexual politics affects us. We talked about how many people active in or leading the labor movement, solidarity work, and various poor people's movements are lesbians. One active, straight middle-aged woman reacted with, "Really, all these people are lesbians?" That

moment was about raising our structural presence.

Now, 5 or 6 years later, we have an organization in Portland that started with a younger base, organizing teenage women with a focus on sexual violence. Because we now have queer lead staff, we can think about integrating gay issues into an economic and social justice agenda. We are figuring out explicit ways to draw out from folks their feeling about sexuality—homophobic or not—in order to move on sexuality issues. We have developed young leaders who can take it apart—addressing questions like: "What does sexuality have to do with race, with me as a young woman, with a willingness to challenge men?" "How do we understand and take on the dyke-baiting?" Those young women are rare and remarkable.

I don't think we've been asking the right questions to figure out, for example, in race politics, how does gender, sexuality and class play out? Or in gender politics, how do race, sexuality and class play out? I do know, e.g., that domestic partnership allows gays and lesbians to gain some economic and civil rights, but if we are concerned to expand the rights of gay people of all classes and races, then we have to know a lot more about one another—what we're experiencing, whom we're relating to and how. How do institutions think of all of us? In the 80s people would say, all our oppressions are connected, the Rightwing hates all of us—gays, immigrants, so-called criminals,

Rinku Sen

etc. I don't think that is enough anymore. People have to be thinking on the streets with their own base about these questions.

Affirmative Action

SP: The so-called California Civil Rights Initiative, Proposition 209, that sought to eliminate affirmative action passed recently after a major mobilization against it. First, could you talk about how CTWO organized against 209?

RS: We had never worked on electoral politics until Proposition 187, the anti-immigration measure, appeared on the ballot in 1994. Our prior mode of operation was direct action and the use of disruptive activity. Staff opinions vary. Some people think that at mini-

mum everyone should vote, others think it is a waste of time. But that disagreement became moot as the Rightwing made ballot initiatives an integral part of their strategy in building a popular base. We had no choice but to engage. People in the community became active in opposing the initiatives. We were driven by our constituency realizing that what was at stake were the ideas involved in the initiative. While we think that we must fight for the things we want and that we have to be expansive about imagining our rights and what society could be, we also realize that there is a value in reactive activity.

We pursued building up a multi-racial core of young people in the state by developing a project to expose the Rightwing in California. Throughout the period

we had been studying the Rightwing—their agenda, and how they developed. We reached out to young people in high schools, youth groups and on campuses. We created a group of people who researched the biggest rightwing funders in the state. We discovered that the lead person was someone who was connected to Home Savings of America. We found the guy who put up the initial \$50,000 for the so-called Civil Rights Initiative—209. He really made it happen. He's a funder of Focus on the Family in Colorado, the group that was crucial in the attack on gay rights there. We thought we could show people how corporations are connected to these rightwing funders. We could show folks that there are options for other kinds of tactics than demonstrations and

On 209, the California Anti-Affirmative Action Referendum

Young people went out to talk to voters, saying, "I can't vote, but this proposition really affects me in these ways and I need you to vote for me." This took off like a house on fire, and I think contributed significantly to the districts where we won on 209...



Participants in a Youth for Justice march on University of California Regent Glenn Campbell's home

the vote. We wanted to involve people in direct action. Our primary goal was to get some concessions from a corporation to show how people can move from research to action to victory. So we went after Home Savings of America with this group of young people.

We set up picket lines at branches of Home Savings around the state. We tied it directly to 209 and demanded to see their affirmative action policy, demanded that they reveal their connections to this rightwing funder. Home Savings is known as a very liberal bank. We demanded that they oppose 209, knowing that they would never do that. They didn't. We did get them to lie about their connection to this guy. Then the young people realized that they just lie straight up. We forced them to admit that they had lied to the media. We forced them to reveal their hiring chart, their hiring policies. What we then learned was that while we see a lot of colored people in a corporation, it doesn't mean they have any power. We felt good in the end that we were able to involve 20-25 young people in this process of taking on a powerful institution and getting some results.

A second organizing effort we generated was the Surrogate Voting Project. Young people went out to talk to voters, saying, "I can't vote, but this proposition really affects me in these ways and I need you to vote for me." This took off like a house on fire, and I think, contributed significantly to the districts where we won on 209 beyond those where we won on 187.

On the Defensive

SP: Could you comment on the kinds of arguments used in favor of affirmative action? Often the message was defensive, saying affirmative action isn't about quotas, instead of a positive vision that speaks to what kinds of policies would achieve race and gender empowerment.

RS: It is much harder to put out a vision than to be reacting to an assault. In relation to 209, I think we did the best we could. My sense of what it takes to develop a vision is leadership and persuasion, but also a lot of time to talk things through. Our challenge here is to build a state-wide community and then to imagine what

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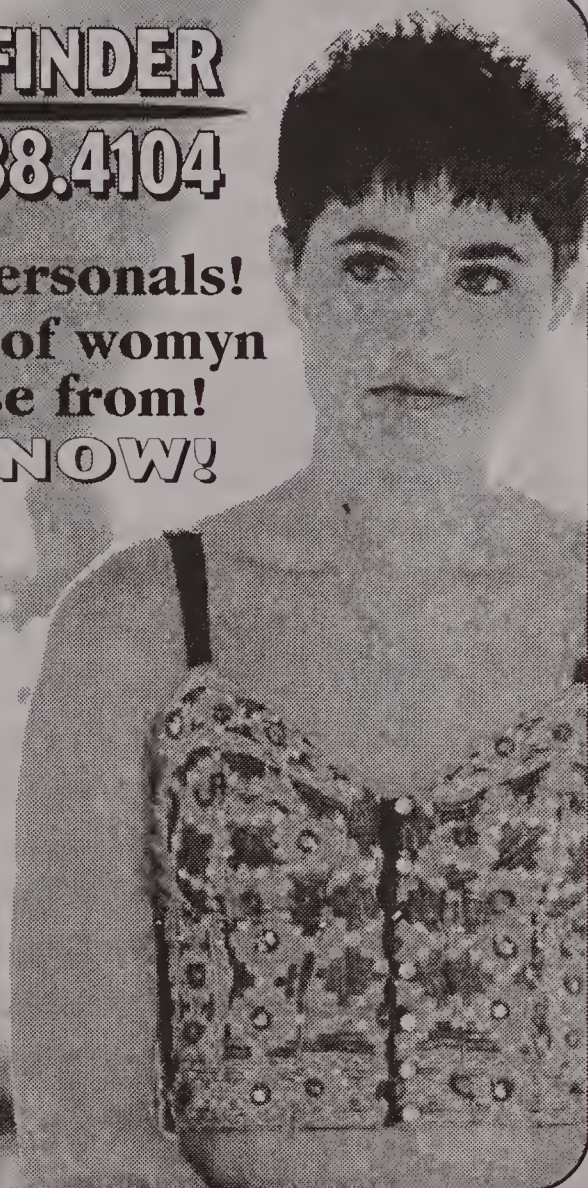
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do government and all sectors of the state have to look like in order to be the kind of community we want to be. There was no time to do that. The Rightwing was so strong, which has been true for 15 years, that we progressives were caught off guard and were too narrow in the scope of our experience, our knowledge, and our relationships that we just tried to hold our ground. But that wasn't enough. We were under attack, pushed back into a retreat position.

The problem we had with 209 and affirmative action was that we found ourselves defending something that we did not like because once affirmative action was won, we stopped fighting for more. And when you stop fighting, the other side is always going to be on the attack. They have something to oppose, and they did.

In the campaign we were able to put out some language and ideas about how things can begin to get better for everybody; and that wasn't going to happen by cutting off, limiting, or scapegoating people.

SP: In Colorado and Oregon, organizers fighting the anti-gay initiatives talked about how the Rightwing is redefining civil rights as a scarce resource. The Right tried to appeal to voters who saw themselves already struggling by saying that if gay people got rights, there wouldn't be any rights left for others—they'd be all used up. This "scarcity of rights" argument is very similar to the one used against affirmative action—if people of color and women are protected from discrimination, white men will lose. So people are persuaded to vote against affirmative action rather than fighting for jobs for everyone. Domestic partnership advocates buy into this view, too, when they argue for health care because they're sort of married, rather than on the basis of a universal right to health care.

RS: I agree that recognizing how the Right has a "scarcity of rights" framework is useful, and helps people understand the attacks. But what I am not clear about is how we are going to use it to think about what we are going to fight for over the next 10-15 years. What would be an expression of that idea that would produce a fundamental change in people's lives?

I do think it is interesting that 209 passed and raising the minimum wage also passed. Living Wage campaigns are now happening all around the country. I think that the strong showing against 209 [in favor of affirmative action] and people voting in favor of higher minimum wage legislation are connected. Both votes favor greater equality.

SP: What kinds of arguments do you think people should use in relation to 209?

RS: If we're able to figure out the experiences that people are having, and relate our information to those experiences, that's the crux of where our most persuasive arguments lie. Lately, I've been talking about the elements of recognition and surprise. People respond to an argument when they are recognized in it and surprised by some of it. The surprise shifts their thinking, but the recognition allows them to be comfortable enough to allow for that shift. I don't think that arguments like "affirmative action hasn't worked anyway, so there's no need for white men to be afraid" are effective. That is a non-argument. Rather it is important to put out that there is no shame in fighting for our rights and in legislating them—the Bill of Rights was such a fight and no one feels ashamed of that. Discrimination is a real happening that can be changed, can be punished. These kinds of arguments can break through people's cynicism. It's not that people are apathetic; they're disappointed.

SP: Did people get the message from No on 209?

RS: The No on 209 field campaign was severely limited by resources, and the same was true for the media campaign. Most people didn't know which way to vote. In the summer of '96 I went to a battered women's shelter with one of my co-workers. We did a workshop on economic policy and violence against women. At one point we looked at actual policies, e.g., we discussed maximum wage as well as minimum wage, wage policies where the top is linked to the bottom. We then talked about proposition 187 and 209, at which point some women said, "Oh, I voted the wrong way on 187." So we discussed the implications of 209. By the end, they wanted to vote against it. But without these kinds of dis-

People respond to arguments when they are recognized in it and surprised by some of it. The surprise shifts their thinking, but the recognition allows them to be comfortable enough to allow for that shift.

cussions, if people are left to read the text of the "Civil Rights Initiative," they probably would vote for it.

Our job is to overcompensate for the failure of the media. That is a huge task. Fifteen year-olds are thinking about the creation of media, of messages, and of different ways to get the word out. That makes me hopeful. We can build a leadership core that is very sophisticated and can be very persuasive; but unless they have a climate they can flourish in, we are going to lose. They have to be part of a larger strategy that helps to change and politicize the climate we're now in. Without politics, that is, an understanding of how power operates, you're more likely to think as a lone individual. The Right has been able to ride the lack of politics, of information, of thinking.

I'm at this place now where I think the issue is political will, not resources. We never will have the resources to do the campaigns we envision, but we move with what we have. One hopeful sign is that

Los Angeles County voted for 187, but against 209. LA County is where a lot of the money in the state is located and is a hard area to unify people, no less to get them to vote progressively. In 187, as in 209, the younger vote tended to be against repressive legislation. It is a multi-racial younger vote, and interestingly, the younger white male, middle and working class to poor voters tend to vote more with their peers of color than with their adult elders, their parents.

SP: What is the "Civil Wrongs Initiative" that people want to use against 209?

RS: Our side is mainly pursuing a legal strategy, and beginning to talk about a non-compliance strategy. But it is easier to do non-compliance on 187 where workers can refuse to ask certain questions or refuse to exclude people from social services. What does it mean regarding affirmative action? Are you going to hire a person of color or a white woman even though you don't have to? It doesn't really work.

When there was a stay on 209 (it has been lifted), institutions were acting as if it didn't exist. Also, many people of color and probably some white women did not apply to California universities or various jobs because of the new policies. Applications are way down from African Americans and Latinos at schools like Berkeley and UCLA. Apparently this is true in Texas as well, where affirmative action was removed from admis-

sions' policies at the state universities. I thought it was important, if you want a non-compliance strategy to be utilized, to flood those campuses with applications.

SP: Do you think the Right will pursue such initiatives elsewhere?

RS: In Colorado, the Right wanted to bring a ballot initiative on affirmative action, but they didn't get enough signatures. They probably will try again. On the other hand, the Right may not continue to focus on affirmative action, but some other government reduction kinds of issues—tax revolts, privatization of government programs like welfare, transportation, education issues like school vouchers. I'm more concerned about our reactions to the privatizing push from the Right. No need to pay taxes, just go buy what you need to buy—health care, your kid's education, etc. We need to spend the next couple of years thinking about how to reclaim and rebuild government as a measure of rebuilding society—that we are a society, not just a bunch of individuals who don't give a shit about each other and can manage on our own. We need to generate excitement about being a community. That is going to be a major political challenge.

Stephanie Poggi is writing a novel about transgendered teenagers. She lives in Oakland, CA and was a precinct co-leader in the Californians for Justice field campaign to defeat Prop. 209.

Christopher Bram

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CB: Yes. It turns out that one of the things I got wrong in the novel was that upper middle class homes did not have Mexican help in the 1950s. That didn't happen until later.

CH: So, she'll be of some British descent.

CB: Or she might play her as German. There were a lot of Central European cooks and servants at the time.

CH: One of the problems with adaptation is always that you can fit a lot more time and other pieces into a novel than you can a screenplay. The book spans from Whale's late adolescence in England to his old age. Is the movie focusing on a particular slice of that?

CB: The movie is concentrating totally on 1957. In fact, they don't have any flashbacks except for the making of *The Bride of Frankenstein*. There will be no scenes of Whale as a boy or his arrival in Hollywood. For reasons of both space and budget, they've had to leave both of those out.

CH: So do you get to sit in a big director's chair, and throw tantrums on the set, and do a whole big Hollywood scene?

CB: Well, I can't throw tantrums. They're talking about shooting it this summer and I hope to go out there and see some of it. Although, I have to realize at this point that it's no longer mine. It's theirs now. Bill has been true to the spirit of the story in his script, so I trust him.

Christopher J. Hogan lives and works in Boston, MA. His media reviews appear regularly in *The Guide* and *Drummer* magazine.



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A book has appeared with that title, including an argument to refuse unmarried women access to sperm banks. (One wonders how this movement's leaders will respond if lesbian marriage is legalized.) Family values discourses are an ongoing production of stigma attached to sexuality, particularly female sexuality, outside marriage and reproduction. One unifying thread in these multiple discourses is the attempt to route parenting rights through marriage. That is, to say that you do not have the right to parent unless you are married.

It is in this political context that the gay marriage struggle is taking place. Think of the "pro-family, but not anti-gay" conservatives, among them such individuals as Massachusetts Governor Weld (recently honored by *The Advocate* as a "friend of the gay community"). Here is their line: "conservatives have spent far too much time on their obsession with gay rights almost to the exclusion of the real problem, to wit, children need two parents...Conservatives have not put a high enough priority on condemning single parenthood. Divorce, illegitimacy and infidelity are the true enemies of the family." We welcome, say these conservatives, those homosexuals who play by the rules, the rules of monogamy, fidelity and responsibility. Marriage and fidelity are crucial social issues, channeling lust into love, caprice into commitment. They urge that conservatives

separate the "real issue" (responsibility versus license) from the phony one (straight versus gay). (Has Gabriel Rotello been reading this literature? How much is the internal attack on gay male sexuality, the idea that marriage and fidelity can end the AIDS epidemic, a product of "family values?") They can do this by recognizing that the two-parent family is "special," and should be favored by public policy.

How quickly these views seep into daily life. I'm driving through Boston with my daughter in the back seat and on the radio is "pro-gay" Governor Weld talking about a great tragedy taking place in Massachusetts because so many children in our state do not have fathers. Our "pro-gay" (and anti-welfare) governor apparently sees no lesbian mothers on his gay screen.

It is time to ask ourselves whether our goal as a movement is to have queers—gays, lesbians, bis, and transpeople—recognized as another category of law-abiding citizens, to be welcomed into "righted" status if we agree to play by the rules of monogamy, fidelity and responsibility. Or, we might ask ourselves whether our history as outlaws, our history of being cast out of the normal family, of being ejected, abjected, defined as "illegitimate" children in our families—

whether that history, that memory, that experience will inform our movement and ensure that we will stand for the right to live differently. Whether, in other words, we will make the goal of our movement to dethrone the power of heterosexuals, of whites, of men to define what is moral and immoral and not to accept their terms of morality as the terms of entitlement to rights.

Mass Culture and the Right

I think that mass culture is a crucial arena of struggle and the Rightwing does too. What we are seeing is the struggle between two moral orders: one represented by the Right—patriarchal, anti-gay, racist, and religious—and one increasingly represented by mass culture that seems to be continually talking back to the Right—secular, "free-er," willing to go with anything that sells. Disney's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*

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From Colorado for Family Values literature.

Sexual Ecology: AIDS and the Destiny of Gay Men
by Gabriel Rotello
New York: Dutton, 1997
\$24.95

Unforgiving Errors

SEXUAL
ECOLOGY
AIDS
AND THE
DESTINY
OF GAY MEN
GABRIEL ROTELLO

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Reviewed by Joshua Oppenheimer

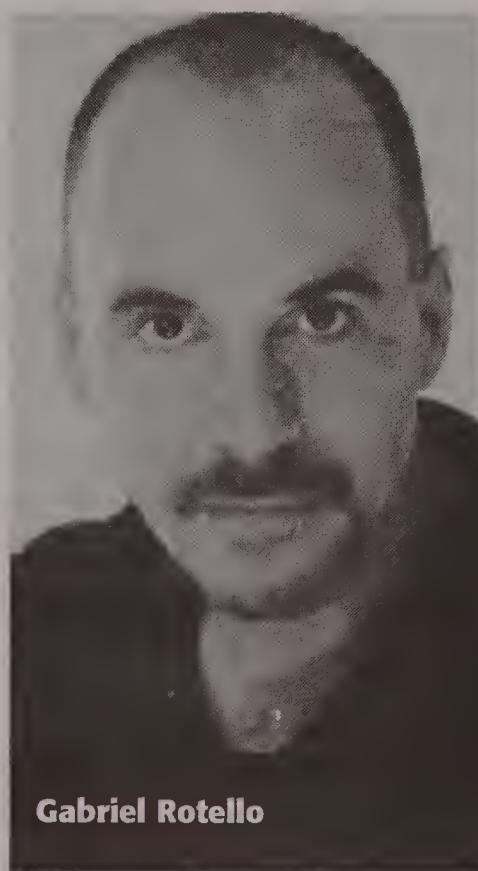
Given the pain and loss inflicted by AIDS upon gay men, nothing could be more infuriating than those who irresponsibly and parasitically reap profit from the health crisis. Gabriel Rotello's *Sexual Ecology* is among the most destructive and opportunistic volumes to emerge from the epidemic. Rotello's arguments are so completely misguided, his metaphors and analytic paradigms so utterly muddled, that only somebody who shares his unmistakably puritanical impulses could praise his book as "intelligent" (Laurie Garrett) or "important" (Larry Kramer).

Pseudo-Science

Under a transparent claim to scientific rigor, the volume neatly introduces a host of metaphors from ecology and environmentalism to stand in for existing and understood epidemiological concepts. Then, having dressed the emperor in new clothes, the author parades him about in an allegedly rigorous argument for nothing short of sexual apartheid, mean-spirited moralism, and—definitely worst of all—unsafe sex. What's so disarming about *Sexual Ecology*, however, is its use of new terms to lead readers to ludicrous and irresponsible conclusions, its sham claims to scientific irreproachability, and its deft but disturbingly well-precedented disguise of Puritanism with false compassion.

Rotello's thesis is that gay men form a unique ecological niche for the breeding of pestilence. Promiscuity within a fairly contained community, he argues, means that microbes are easily transmitted until they saturate

the whole ecosystem (what epidemiologists would call a "core group"). In this context of unfettered reproduction and transmission, Rotello suggests that the evolution via mutation of new fatal epidemics—such as AIDS—is a virtual inevitability. He claims that this pattern of unrestrained sexual "mixing" and "blending" within a large but contained population is unique to gay men and certain "communities of heterosexual crack users." He contrasts gay male sexual ecology to that of heterosexuals (presumably of the non-crack-using variety) by noting that heterosexual transmission of microbes is limited by higher levels of monogamy and by the lack of a community incestuously drawing partners from its own ranks. Thus, while HIV might quickly spread among a whole circle of gay friends and their tricks, it tends to spread in more limited ways in the "general population." For instance, a straight woman who contracted HIV from a blood bank might pass it to her husband, from whom it might travel to the occasional extramarital relationship to another husband to another wife, where it may end. Rotello argues that these limits on transmission, emerging from the social organization of monogamy itself, are sufficient to prevent the critical mass of transmissions within a core group necessary for the emergence of a genuine epidemic (a situation where a virus infects ever more people until a community is "saturated").



Gabriel Rotello

Rotello's inability to acknowledge the diversity and complexity of lesbian life...mirrors his myopic vision of all gay men as sexually predatory gym queens who would settle down in holy matrimony if only given the chance.

So far so good. But when Rotello comes to the second half of his "ecological" argument, his speculations are about as scientific as those of a back street palmist. Rotello suggests that so long as our community remains a healthy ecological niche for existing viruses, so long as viruses and bacteria are rapidly and easily transmitted among gay men, fatal strains of previously unfatal viruses (herpes seems to be a lead contender) may quickly emerge. If evolutionary theory says anything on this subject, it's that healthy ecological niches tend to discourage rather than encourage the rapid emergence of new species because intense competition for ecological resources with the pre-mutant strains creates near impossible odds for the new mutants. But this point aside, Rotello's most unforgivable scientific error is the direct equation of the fast-paced and

mutation-prone replication of HIV to the replication of other viruses and micro-organisms (such as herpes simplex). HIV replication is unique because the virus attacks the very apparatus that would otherwise prevent unfettered reproduction: the immune system itself. This is no small mistake, because it is the linchpin for Rotello's ominous prediction that unless the gay community completely reconfigures its sexual life, other viruses or bacteria as devastating as AIDS will surely emerge in the communal petri dish in the near future. He forgets that all other viruses and bacteria meet an awesomely powerful match in the human immune system. While Rotello does raise the possibility of mutant HIV strains transmitted easily through kissing or oral sex (so that encouraging condom use would no longer work as a prevention strategy), he provides no cita-

tion for this alarming suggestion. In an otherwise well-referenced volume, in a discussion of hard science, in a discussion that provokes tangible fear, it is difficult to excuse this glaring lack of bibliographical information. In preparing this review, I spoke with several prominent microbiologists and virologists who say such a mutation seems highly unlikely.

Rotello proposes that if we understand the gay male community “ecologically,” we will also understand that the only long-term means of preventing devastating epidemics like AIDS is to make sweeping changes in our sexual lives, to build monogamous relationships, and to eschew promiscuity. He warns AIDS activists that merely prescribing condoms without advocating an end to promiscuity (what he calls the “condom code”) leaves the gay community vulnerable to new epidemics of viruses transmitted via routes unobstructed by latex. He launches three basic attacks on the condom code, all of which are easily answered.

The Condom Code

First, he cites condom failure and notes the usual causes: oil-based lubricants, use of brands not intended for anal sex, and other forms of misuse. Obviously, it’s not enough for AIDS prevention activists to urge men “to use a condom every time.” We need to educate about correct use, and lobby for stringent testing and safety regulations so that suitably strong condoms can be clearly labeled and marketed as such. In the meantime, we need to teach gay men which condoms are appropriate for anal sex, and which are not.

Second, Rotello makes a dual argument regarding oral sex. First, he notes that oral sex, “while significantly less risky than receptive anal sex, nonetheless carries a risk of HIV infection.” The statistics on oral sex make plain that the risk is sufficiently low that we can with relative certainty call oral sex “safe.” (For instance, one is considerably more likely to be killed by a car than to contract HIV via oral sex, if one avoids sucking with open cuts in the mouth.) Rotello’s claim that oral sex is *not completely safe* invokes a meaningless concept of absolute safety that is culturally and historically determined. “Absolute safety” is a relatively recent construc-

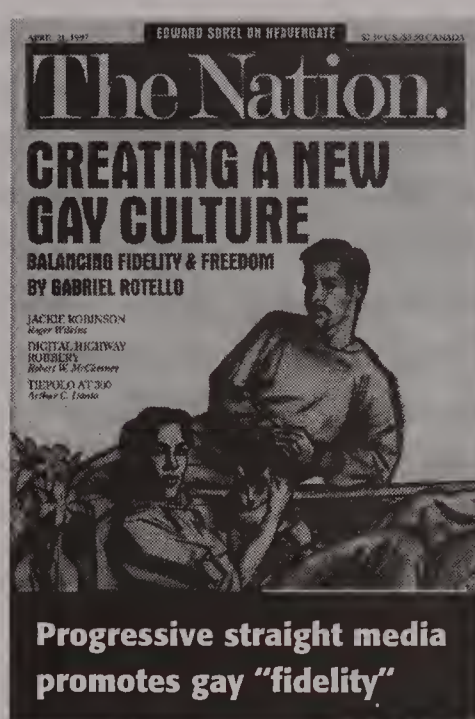
tion, and can’t be separated from New Age fears of chemical sensitivity, anxieties about urban crime, scapegoating of immigrants, animus toward racial miscegenation, the Cold War and its McCarthyite fears of communist infiltrators. (Remember Stanley Kubrick’s paranoid General who launches a nuclear holocaust in order to prevent the “contamination of our precious bodily fluids.”)

Rotello argues that the risks of oral sex have been “largely glossed over by the condom code.” In fact, the suggestion that oral sex is safer sex is a relatively new one in American AIDS education. For many years, safer sex campaigns presented gay men with a “spectrum of risk,” plotted out-of-scale on a rather crude looking thermometer. At the bottom were safe activities (minus oral sex). In the middle, somewhere, was oral sex. And up at the top was unprotected anal sex. By emphasizing (and usually grossly exaggerating) the risks of a relatively safe activity, this approach bred a very recognizable fatalism and despair: either give up sex entirely, or infection is inevitable. Since the former is not an option, men responded by having unprotected anal sex—a genuinely risky activity. AIDS activists eventually understood this problem, and adopted the European approach of promoting oral sex as safer sex. We will never know how many deaths are associated with emphasizing the risks of oral sex, but Rotello’s book may indeed contribute to the toll.

Third, and most compellingly, Rotello claims that “use a condom every time” fails to address the multiple psychological reasons why gay men continue to have unsafe sex, even though they know how to use a condom. Rotello is absolutely right in this critique of simple sloganeering and pamphlet-driven approaches to AIDS prevention. But this necessitates creative and practical AIDS prevention strategies. Gay Men Fighting AIDS (GMFA) in London has pioneered a model approach. They have developed a network of safer sex discussion groups that educate about correct condom use, provide a space for discussion of the subtleties of safer sex (how to negotiate safer sex with strangers on a cruising ground, while being gang fucked in a play dungeon, or with a long-term partner who has professed monogamy), and offer a forum for discussing the emo-

tional reasons why gay men often fail, against their better judgment, to demand safer sex. By identifying the dynamics that lead men to unsafe sex, participants are better prepared to recognize the problem before they find themselves engaged in unsafe behavior. GMFA's groups are often tailored to specific sexual needs (such as "Bondage for Beginners"). At the end of the session, participants brainstorm topics for new groups, and the facilitators train participants to lead their own groups in the future. GMFA arranges meeting spaces, but otherwise the sessions require no budget to produce. For far less money than it takes to publish simplistic pamphlets, complex, emotionally textured AIDS education can be delivered to a wide audience. Above all, this approach offers people a chance to recognize themselves in the message, and to negotiate safer sex in relation to the specific complexities of their own emotional lives.

Rather than use his critique of prevention pamphlets as an opportunity to imagine new, creative approaches to AIDS education, Rotello calls for a completely impractical and wholesale cultural change. Rotello's plea for a "sustainable" gay culture is a complete rejection of the public health concept of "harm reduction," which emphasizes the need to prevent disease with the lowest possible impact on the way people lead their lives. Rotello dismissively sums up the approach: "Do not



interrupt the cultural and behavioral context of AIDS transmission.... Just interrupt the virus." Of course, the basis of the "ecological" argument is that we can't sustain an interruption of the virus without wholesale cultural change, that we need to change gay culture and community until it is no longer a healthy ecological niche for microbial transmission.

But what Rotello refuses to acknowledge is that if the vast majority of gay men would use condoms correctly, whenever they have anal intercourse—with as many partners as they choose, as often as they like, anonymously or in the context of a relationship—this would be a genuine and dramatic ecological change. The gay community would not remain a healthy niche for HIV transmission. What Rotello refuses to acknowledge is that this is an achievable goal: all we need are creative approaches to AIDS education that emphasize everything wonder-

ful about human sexual diversity, that make space for complex emotional discussion, and that reach enough gay men.

It's unlikely that Rotello, who has thought so "rigorously" about safer sex, doesn't know this. Rather, it seems that he is motivated not by deep-seated concern for gay people's lives, but by the opposite. To see this, we need only look at his vision of an "ecologically sustainable" gay culture.

The Attack on Liberation

Rotello begins with an attack on consumerism, but he fails to locate it in a changing and ever more mainstreamed commercial gay scene. Instead, he discusses it as part of "gay culture" in the most general sense. And, absolutely inaccurately, he places the origins of consumerism and the marketing of gay male hypermasculinity in liberationist models of gay community and politics. In one particularly manipulative and revisionist paragraph, he equates promiscuity, consumerism, furtiveness, competitiveness, misogyny (termed "masculinism"), and emotional callousness. The problems here are obvious. First, the Gay Liberation Front generally had an explicitly anti-capitalist politics, and can in no way be linked to the emergence of a gay commercial scene. There simply is no grounds for associating gay sexual and political liberation, on the one hand, with consumerism, the marketing of masculinity, and competition, on the other. In fact, most

book

proponents of liberation would vigorously attack the commercial scene's depletion of meaningful spaces for gay social interaction, as well as its codification and gross over-simplification of our sexual imagination. Indeed, it's a remarkable irony that anti-promiscuity, anti-consumerist Rotello worked as a promoter for profiteering gay society parties—featuring easy sex and drugs—in the late 1980s (see Anthony Haden-Guest's *Last Dance*) and currently writes a column in *The Advocate*, the magazine that invented the marketing and commodification of a superficial gay lifestyle.

Second, Rotello's claim that promiscuity is "masculinist" implicitly accepts the sexist (and anti-sex) understanding of women as inherently interested in monogamy. It accepts domestic slavery's consignment of women to their husbands' homes. And it leaves unquestioned a whole host of essentializing assumptions about femininity and masculinity.

Third, Rotello falsely portrays gay liberationists as moralistically trumpeting promiscuity, and soundly denouncing "those gay idealists and hippies who envisioned a nurturing, nonmasculinist and noncompetitive sexual culture" as "assimilationist and self loathing." Of course, those of us who believe in sexual liberation celebrate monogamous and non-monogamous relationships, so long as people are honest with themselves and their partners about their own sexual needs and desires.

Fourth, and most importantly, Rotello clearly ignores AIDS activists' own discussions of consumerism. Reflecting the attitudes of many people in the fight against AIDS, Michael Bronski has pointed out that the battle against consumerism in the gay community is a matter of life and death, that the insecurity and low self-esteem engendered by relentless marketing of gay lifestyle leads people not to take care of themselves. However, Bronski is one of the "liberationists" Rotello quotes (completely out of context), and (mis)associates with consumerism itself. (See Bronski's "Why Gay Men Still Have Unsafe Sex" in the new anthology, *Acting On Aids*). Indeed, it seems quite clear that if the orgy of gay consumerism is congruent with any particular sexual ethic, it's the very model of serial monogamy and gay marriage that Rotello espouses.

De-sexualizing Gay Culture

Which brings me to Rotello's concrete proposals for "incentives" the gay community might use to curtail sexual freedom. Some of these are sensible if not original: Rotello calls on AIDS activists to help organize support structures for gay youth. Some are even insightful: he argues very rightly that AIDS prevention activists must tackle gay men's fears of aging. Rotello understands that the marketed gay lifestyle's absolute silence on old age—old gay men simply *do not exist*—creates a mammoth cultural problem for activists whose sole purpose is to encourage gay men to take actions that will enable them to reach old age. However, all's not well: a principal proposal for a "sustainable" community involves building institutions that encourage non-sexual—and non-political—forums for gay men to come together. He suggests gay choruses, recreation centers, and religious organizations (reminiscent of English holiday camps). At first, it's a benign enough vision. But on second glance, it's strikingly banal and ridiculously sentimental: gay men, who have nothing to do with each other save a sexual interest in other men, clubbed together not for sex (a natural context for people who share only deviant sexual appetite), but for what? singing circles and prayer groups. Will "Deliver us from perversion" be the meditation on the lips of the gathered faithful?

If I seem unfair here, it's because I was particularly disturbed by the proposal that earns most of Rotello's attention: gay marriage. The argument is the most bizarre justification for gay matrimony I have seen to date: marriage would be a powerful incentive to monogamy, and if most gay people were married, then our community would no longer be a breeding ground for virulent strains of pestilence. With less "mixing and blending," we would slowly become uninfested with disease. Give us marriage, and we can get rid of AIDS. (Who cares? Politicians have never concerned themselves with our survival in the past, why should they now?) Rotello shows rare courage in acknowledging—and anticipating and celebrating—the divisive impact marriage could have on the gay community: "the core of the objection—that marriage would provide status to those who married and thus implicitly penalize those who did not—seems

essentially correct. Indeed, that's the key point." I wondered, as I read this, if Rotello had forgotten his earlier assertion that heterosexism's de-legitimation of gay people's lives leads to low self-esteem that, in turn, leads to unsafe sex. If our community were now to tell us that most forms of sexual expression were illegitimate, we would lose one of our most valuable resources in fighting the epidemic: our solidarity, our commitment to freedom, and our affirmation of sexual deviance.

Breaks in Community

Rotello imagines that marriage would provide a set of pressures that would contrast favorably with "gym culture"'s pressures to be perpetually young and muscular. Marriage hardly seems to discourage anorexia among heterosexual women. Indeed, the compulsion to marry creates a divisive climate of competition—undercutting any notion of community solidarity—as women are forced to jockey to become desirable "marriage material." Given this, it's completely unclear how gay marriage could discourage superficial concern for body image, low self-esteem (which leads men to have unsafe sex), or competition.

Moreover, despite his diatribe against "masculinism," Rotello turns his back on any commitment to feminism when he offers his anthropological history of marriage. No mention of the exchange of women in the creation of kinship bonds (an analysis that begins with Levi-Strauss but is radicalized by Gayle Rubin). Indeed, if three hundred years of feminism has continuously emphasized one thing, it is that marriage is bad for women. Rotello speaks only of the need for monogamy and stability in the raising of children. As though stable nuclear families are the safe havens for women and children that the Christian Right would have us believe!

It doesn't help matters that Rotello claims he doesn't want the gay community to model itself after the straights. He claims that lesbians offer the ideal model of serial monogamy which gay men might do well to emulate. This has all the subtlety of the joke that lesbians drive U-Hauls on their second date. Rotello's inability to acknowledge the diversity and complexity of lesbian life is not only dismissive and belittling, it mirrors his myopic

vision of all gay men as sexually predatory gym queens who would settle down in holy matrimony if only given the chance.

In the end, Rotello's call for monogamy leaves a gaping question unanswered: what would monogamy do to prevent HIV-transmission? In a community where 50 percent of its members are HIV positive, a call to monogamy does nothing to stop the spread of HIV. In fact, studies that are conspicuously absent in Rotello's book reveal that allegedly monogamous relationships are among the most difficult contexts for negotiating safe behavior. By contrast, as Cindy Patton and other AIDS activists have pointed out, without the bathhouses, early prevention activists would have had little or no way of reaching gay men and establishing new community standards for sexual safety.

Given this, there is a spectre haunting *Sexual Ecology*. It's the spectre of sexual apartheid. Too cowardly to mention it by name, and savvy enough to realize that doing so would leave him with no credibility, the sexual segregation of positive and negative gay men is the only way Rotello's vision of monogamy-without-condoms could possibly work to prevent the spread of AIDS. This is an ethical conclusion too perverse to take seriously.

Ultimately, *Sexual Ecology* offers no implementable or sustainable program for AIDS prevention, and irresponsibly attacks those approaches that, even if flawed, have a real chance in saving lives. Rotello's thinking is far too sloppy to be unmotivated by malice toward freedom and the diversity of gay sexuality. Is it any surprise, then, that *Sexual Ecology* has found its own ecological niche in the straight press? Praised in the *New York Times*, featured in the *Nation*, Rotello has found his own lucrative ecosystem in a broader culture that cares little for our survival in the face of the health crisis, and even less for the richness and diversity of our communities.

Joshua Oppenheimer is editor of and contributor to *Acting On Aids: Sex, Drugs, And Politics* (Serpent's Tail, June 1997). He is an award-winning filmmaker whose credits include *These Places We've Learned To Call Home...* and *The Entire History Of The Louisiana Purchase*.

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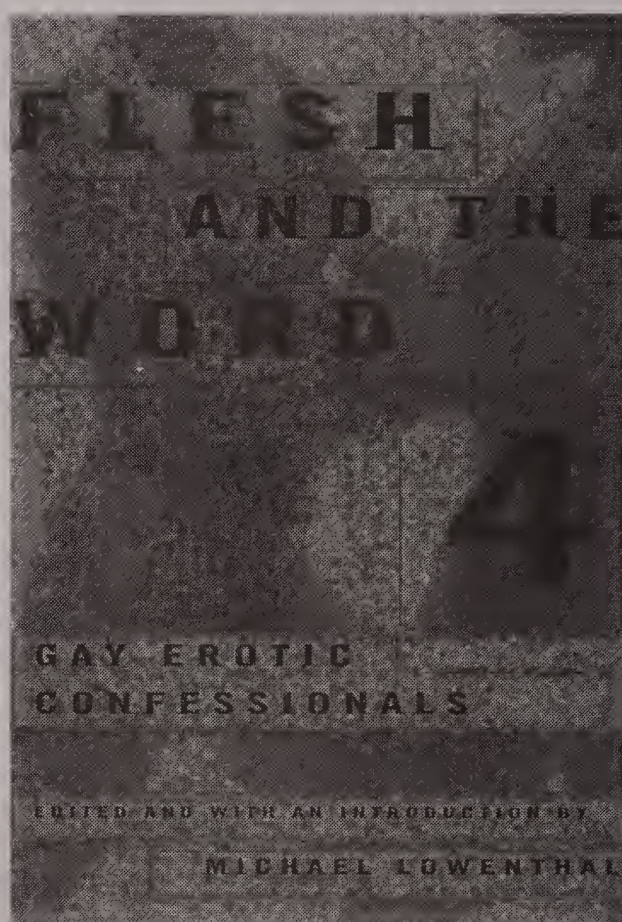
Flesh and the Word 4

Edited and with an Introduction

by Michael Lowenthal

New York: Plume, April, 1997

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Erotic

Truth-telling

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Reviewed by John Keene

For most Americans the novel long ago ceded its role as the great mirror of human existence to television, and is now yielding in the domain of literature to the memoir. Or so current wisdom tells us. Among adherents of high art, anxiety is high and palpable: *The New York Times Magazine* went so far as to devote an entire issue last May to this topic. Memoirs are the vogue. Readers now crave in words what they have been getting visually, from talk shows and tabloid news programs. Tales of self-destruction, dissolution, and redemption, excavations of childhood, adolescence and adulthood, lurid narrations deriving not from some obviously imagined fictional realm (the terrain of the novelist, the short-story writer), but from a recaptured self, or some semblance thereof: beside the keen rendering of an Irish boyhood we have father/adult daughter incest. This appears to be what the public desires, and to paraphrase (liberally) Dr. Johnson, it's not a good idea to ignore the public (if money is an objective, that is).

Michael Lowenthal, the editor of *Flesh in the Word 4*, states as much in his introduction. He tells us that "if the eighties were the era of tell-all biography, the nineties are the era of the tell-all autobiography....Confession is 'in.'" Of course confession has been in since the 1950s and 1960s, when its avatars, such as the late Allen Ginsberg, among others, changed the face of American poetry, and continues unabated today. Indeed, the confessional tendency has been a fixture of American literature since the time of the Puritans. For gay men and women (Lowenthal explicitly states that this volume concentrates on gay men), telling one's own story, speaking the versions and variations of the love whose name could once not be uttered, is necessary, vital, and imperative. Lowenthal equates not doing so with the powerful slogan "Silence=Death," which, though somewhat overstated, does make a valid point. As is the case with any silenced group, if gay men and lesbians do not speak up and out, no one is going to speak for us.

"Emotional Truths"

Lowenthal does draw a line between the act of merely setting down erotic and pornographic tales (all manner of fetishes receive regular magazine, zine and Internet treatment) and works that convey what he calls "the emotional truths of gay life." What he's after here is the latter. He's proposing an anthology of tales that, through their exploration of sexual experiences, bare the heart of gay men's lives. The goal then is to offer works that show these authors, nearly all accomplished writers in a given genre, writing as regular people, which is the appeal of memoirs anyway, isn't it? Art saves nothing, as Auden once said of poetry, while these accounts might at least provide catharsis. Perhaps. At any rate, memory's doors stand open here, blazing with candor, beckoning us to enter.

"Many of the activities and attractions [in the volume] are shockingly explicit," Lowenthal cautions; though in light of much of what is currently available even on newsstands in New York City, I would have to differ. Some of

these memoirs are hilarious, some heartbreaking, many moving, a few banal; as in any good anthology, you get a real mix. Some of the pieces, like Darieck Scott's "Why I Need To Be Gangbanged To Be Turned On!," succeed on every level. Scott examines the development of his fascination with gang-bang scenarios, and recounts adventures with several men or boys at different points in his adolescence. (Such adventures evoke in some of us the profound longings, played out in fantasy, that we have felt for those

who offer no possibility of physical connection). His tightly drawn portraits of these young men, and his feelings for them ring true. So does his evocation of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Scott captures the polymorphousness of his desires, of desire itself.

Critic Michael Bronski's "Doctor Fell" is a highly effective, and affecting narrative. An essay in journal format, Bronski explores the conflicts he has experienced, both currently and in the past, in trying to deal with two competing relationships, one with a fellow S/M adherent named Jim, the other with his late partner, the poet Walta Borowski. That both have succumbed to AIDS is not incidental here, for the piece is about the profound and intricate interrelationship of love and loss, and how certain decisions made at a given time trouble the spirit long afterwards. Bronski, as in all of his writings, is unflinching in his depictions of sex; he describes the cuttings he made on Jim's body without any hint of apology, censoriousness. But Bronski is equally straightforward in his reflections on how his actions might have affected his late lover Walta; his truthfulness, sincerity, candor—even as he overtly notes the "artifice" of the journal entries—resounds even after one has moved on to other pieces. Bronski writes,

Moments after Walta died—at 9:05 p.m. on February 9, 1994, at home in the bed I'd inherited from Jim, in which he had died eight years earlier—I sat next to him and talked to him for the last time. My first thought was to apologize for all the times I might have hurt him by my relationship with Jim. Why is this harder to confess than precise details of erotic extravagance?

Lowenthal does draw a line between the act of merely setting down erotic and pornographic tales...and works that convey..."the emotional truths of gay life."

book

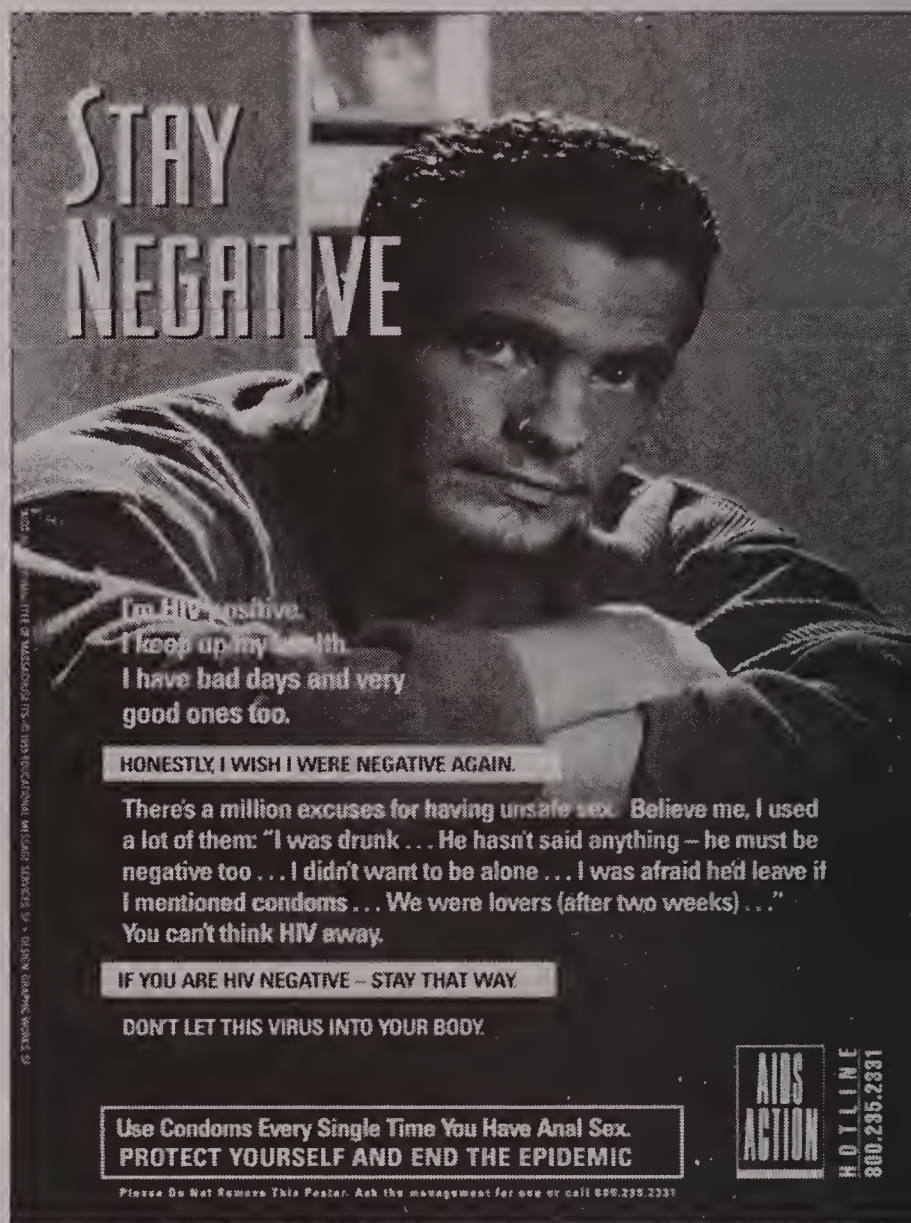
At such moments, the line between art and artifice falls away, and we are definitely in the presence of the "emotional truth" of a specific life, across lives, that editor Lowenthal is after.

Diverse Recollections

Some of the tales are consciously arty, others almost journalistically unadorned. Alex Jeffers's "Three Men I Want," and Brian Bouldrey's "What's Up, Doc?" are formally experimental, much in the manner of these writers' previously published fictions and poems, and yet each of these pieces still satisfies both the editor's criteria and the reader's expectations. Tom Cole's bizarre and delightful "Lax or Unstable" made me laugh out loud, while Ed Sikov's essay on teacher-student relationships, "Jailbait 1997," provides an interesting and thoughtful counterpoint to the general feel of the collection. Avram Morrison's "Brown Party," a record of a journey deep into the truly dark core of Manhattan, offers quite a different take on the construction and experience of desire, much in the manner of Samuel R. Delany's brilliant novel *The Mad Man*.

Flesh and the Word 4 is an interesting and worthwhile collection in many ways. If I have quibbles, they concern the lack of diversity of the authors. Lowenthal does include the work of several men of color, but this anthology, like so many, seems mainly a record of white, middle-class gay male lives. Perhaps this narrowness inheres in the idea and process of creating a "gay male" anthology in a society where "gay" so often equals white, male and middle class. Lowenthal *does* avoid narratives that succumb to the usual stereotypes about men of color, racial fetishes, or white-nonwhite power relations. As a reader, I would like to see a volume that offers a broader range of perspectives, of truths, in terms of race, ethnicity, class, and so on, a collection as diverse in terms of backgrounds as sexual perspectives. In the end, the dichotomies of pornography/memoir, fiction/memoir, and fiction/truth, ultimately struck me as less important than each author's abilities (or inabilities) to utilize memories to get at something beyond the merely superficial, to see and employ memoir not simply as a form of self-(re)presentation; but, as Lowenthal notes, as a way of striking the deeper chords, not always heard or heard frequently enough, of gay male life.

John Keene is the author of *Annotations* (New Directions, 1995). One of his stories will appear in *Best American Gay Fiction Volume II* (Little, Brown) in the fall of 1997.



STAY NEGATIVE

I'm HIV positive.
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There's a million excuses for having unsafe sex. Believe me, I used a lot of them: "I was drunk . . . He hasn't said anything — he must be negative too . . . I didn't want to be alone . . . I was afraid he'd leave if I mentioned condoms . . . We were lovers (after two weeks) . . ." You can't think HIV away.

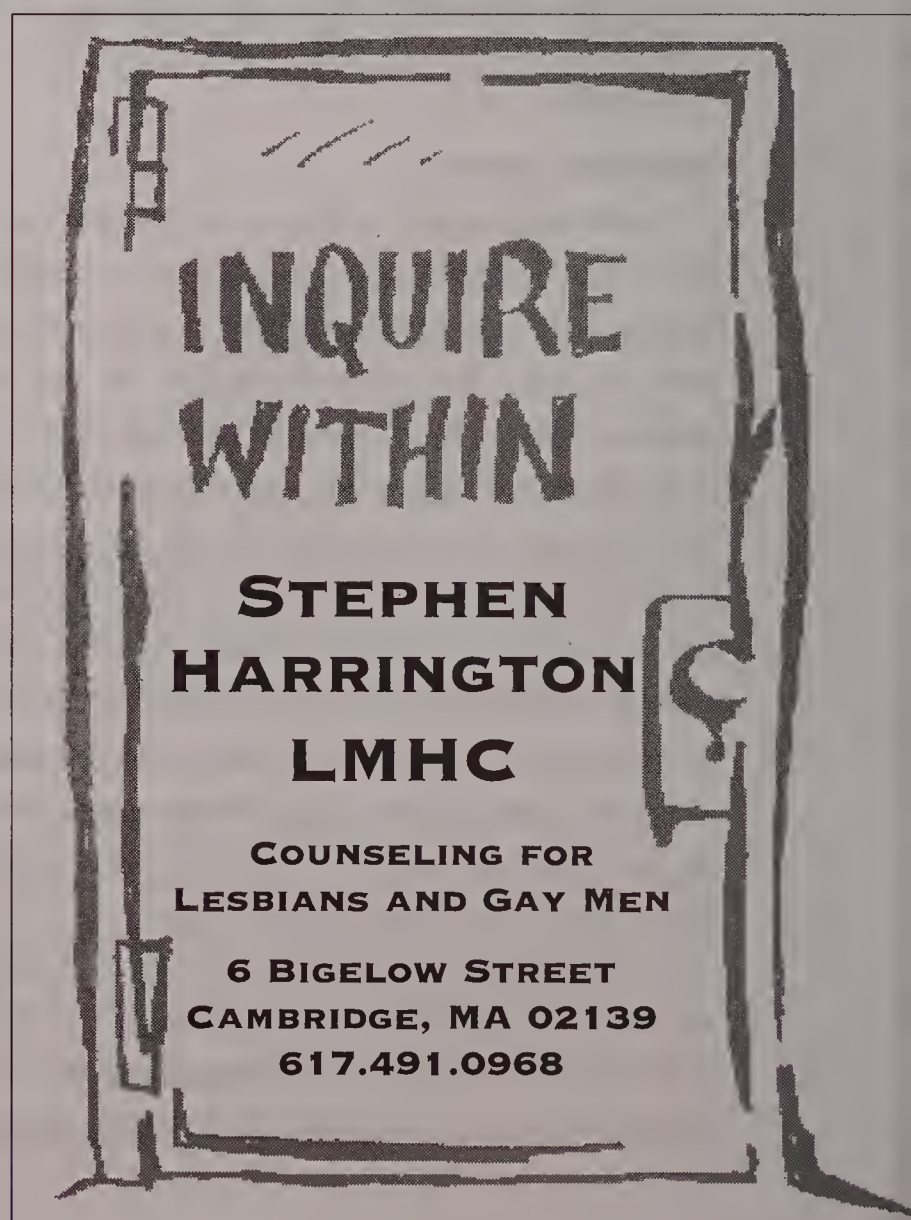
IF YOU ARE HIV NEGATIVE — STAY THAT WAY.

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continued from page 37

(which begins with a carnival of inversion in which dogs lead their masters around by their collars) could be read as a send-up of the Christian Right. Frolo speaks about justice but won't tolerate anyone different. He persecutes the Gypsies and is driven by disavowed lust. Or recent episodes of *The Simpsons* where steelworkers are supposed to represent manly men and then they turn out to be gay. Or the battle over *Ellen* where Disney/ABC decide to let Ellen come out and the Right mounts a campaign to get advertisers to withdraw. I think these two moral orders are on a perpetual collision course, that each fuels and energizes the other. But there is a problem here. These appear to be the only alternatives we have.

We have the rightwing, conservative, moralizing political discourse, on the one hand; and on the other hand, corporate mass culture, which begins to look like a site of freedom. Resistance to the Right becomes watching *Ellen*, and writing thank-you notes to the corporations that sponsor the show. In the face of a restrictive, hypocritical moralizing order, the market is continually enhanced—as the only alternative. In a world marked by the collapse of communism and social movements, the ability to buy for your self becomes key to your sense of freedom. It is the equation of freedom with market freedom, the lodging of our safety and security in what we can buy, that I think is the deepest “value” that progressive queers need to confront, including in ourselves. It is the underlying “family value” that most often goes unarticulated.

If you had to summarize what domestic US politics, culture, and society are about right now, you might say the privatization of everything—health care, housing, education—and, as I have been suggesting, the *privatization of the imagination of freedom*. The “family value” that I want us to challenge, the ultimate family value, is privatization. Here is how I recently encountered this in myself. I went to my daughter's school as a lesbian parent to talk to the entire teaching staff of the school. A group of us presented our experiences of our kids in the schools, most of it quite good, and talked about how much we rely on the teachers to work collaboratively with us, to tell us about what's happening, and how best to address the issues with very young children, e.g., does the fact that she has two moms affect daily interactions at the school and

how? After about an hour of presentations, the first hand went up. The teacher asked, “Why are we here? Are we here because some parents are having some problems?” Then, “If you want to introduce sexuality into the curriculum (we were talking about explaining “different families” in the first grade), then you should go to the School Committee. There is no problem here about gay anything; if there is, we deal with it.”

My first reaction was, “I don't want my daughter subjected to these phobes.” Another mother responded, “We're considering home schooling ourselves.” OK, that was a joke, but I think it points to the privatization issue. All we can think about is: “How do I protect *my* kid within what exists?” When I thought about it afterward, I thought I don't want *any* kids exposed to those homophobes. I realized that we're all up against trying to salvage something for our own kid in an order that we really don't believe can change. So how do we shift that?

There is no law of nature that says that the family should be the primary determinant of access to the resources and opportunities that a society has to provide. It is not a law of nature that we should organize the distribution of resources through families. It is the law of an unequal society that says that the families that you grow up in determine where you end up, how much social respect, social value you have, how many material opportunities, what kinds of schools you go to, where you should live. A fundamental challenge to inequality must govern a progressive queer family policy. We must envision a different kind of family policy so that the family does not remain the institution that ensures, disguises, and legitimates the intergenerational transmission of inequality. We want a kind of family policy that challenges the view that resources should flow through and stay within private families. Therefore we must oppose the kind of privatization that the family ensures, and begin to speak about *public* schools, *public* facilities, *public* services as central to our vision and policy. Not: whose kid?, my kid!, but that great slogan from the Rainbow Curriculum battles in New York: Whose kids?, Our kids, All of our kids.

Margaret Cerullo teaches at Hampshire College.

Queer Prisoners...

What Can We Do?

By Donna Kiefer And Julie Netherland

I am contacting your organization out of sheer fear and desperation.... I have been physically struck and called, "bitch," "faggot," "punk," and "sissy." I have been spit on while called a "faggot." I have had my personal property stolen and my very life endangered. I was beaten brutally three months ago. On another unit, I was raped. I have done everything in my power to get protection from both inmates and staff. So far I have had little success.... The abuse has left many scars. When I say that I'm at the end of my rope, I mean just that.... I don't want my name to be added to the long list of lives lost behind these walls.

—A Prisoner in the Southwest

All I'm asking for from this letter is for some help because me and my lover are still going through hell in this prison. ... They keep picking fights with us because we are gay, and every time we say something in response they put us in isolation cells. When we got out, instead of putting us in single cells, they put us in dorms. They know that we gay inmates cannot stay in dorms because of our safety from inmates that have something against gays. There are other gay inmates here who are put in dorms, or written up for disciplinary tickets, or had their stuff burned up. I could go on but the point is they don't like gays. That is the truth... we see it and we can feel it.

—a Prisoner in the Northeast

Hundreds of prisoners contact the Gay & Lesbian Prisoner Project each month, writing about the humiliation and violence they face as queer prisoners. Stories of verbal and physical harassment are commonplace, as are tales of rape and other sexualized violence. Those doing the harassing are just as likely to be correctional officers as other inmates. In some states, it is legal for correctional officers to have sex with inmates, and gay-identified prisoners are particularly vulnerable to being raped and pimped by correctional officers and other inmates. Many queer prisoners do not feel safe in the general population and sacrifice the few privileges accorded to those in general population (such as daily exercise) to go into "protective custody" in order to escape their tormentors.

Isolation from their queer brothers and sisters is a less immediately threatening, but still very serious problem faced by gay lesbian, bisexual and transgender prisoners. Many have little or no access to information about queer history and culture or the day-to-day lives of queer men and women on "the outside." Indeed, gay publications, like *Gay Community News (GCN)*, are sometimes censored by prison officials. The queer identities of these prisoners are formed in spaces rife with homophobia and anti-gay violence.

Lastly, many of those contacting the Gay & Lesbian Prisoner Project are HIV positive and are struggling with the particular hardships resulting from that status. Published reports found that in 1992, AIDS cases for people in state or federal prisons reached 195 for every 100,000 prisoners, as compared to 18 for every 100,000 in the general US population. Despite the high incidence of HIV in prisons, AIDS education and counseling programs are on the wane. According to the US Centers for Disease Control, the percentage of prison systems providing instructor-led HIV/AIDS education in at least one of their facilities decreased from 96 percent in 1990 to 75 percent in 1994. Only 7 percent were operating peer-led programs. Only two state prison systems and four city/county jail systems report making condoms available to inmates in their facilities. The lack of information and support for HIV positive queer prisoners can leave them feeling especially isolated and afraid.

GCN's Role

Since its founding in 1973, *GCN* (and later its umbrella organization, the Bromfield Street Educational Foundation) understood a connection between a social policy of incarcerating people believed to be "criminals" and a legal policy of criminalizing behavior deemed to be unacceptable, e.g., sodomy. By 1977, a prisoner project was launched.

The activities of the Prisoner Project have varied over the years and have reflected the energies of its volunteers. While many spirits have fed the Project, Mike Riegle, who died of AIDS in 1992, was the moving force behind the project for many years. In addition to publicizing issues of concern to prisoners, Mike personally

corresponded with hundreds of prisoners. Many of them still write the Project about the support and nurturance they received from Mike.

Today at the Gay & Lesbian Prisoner Project, we help individual prisoners connect to the queer community. At the present time, this consists mainly of providing a free *GCN* subscription to to any prisoner requesting it and printing prisoner pen pal ads in each issue of *GCN*. We also provide a comprehensive resource list and self-help guide for prisoners. We hope to expand our work to do education and advocacy around prison reform issues once we have attracted additional volunteer help and funding. In the meantime, we believe we are making a difference in the lives of individual prisoners by helping them to feel less isolated and providing them with information that will allow them to assert more control over their lives.

The difficulties facing gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender prisoners invite many responses. The need is so great that there is much room for creative involvement and solutions. We welcome your assistance and your suggestions. Please volunteer your time to read and sort letters from prisoners, do data entry, prepare response letters, or work on one of the many other tasks or projects that require attention. If you cannot be involved directly with the Gay & Lesbian Prisoner Project, consider getting involved with a prison reform group in your area. If you cannot do that, consider responding to one of the prisoner pen pal ads posted in each issue of *GCN*. Do something, anything, to show our queer brothers and sisters in prison that they are not alone and that we do care.

To get **involved**
with the **Gay & Lesbian**
Prisoner Project,
call (617) **262-6969.**

pen pals

[NOTE: Ad corresponds to prisoner listed below the ad]

BM looking for a mate to correspond with. Also interested in TV/TS's.

John Beale, W57470

MCI - Cedar Junction
P.O. Box 100
Walpole, MA 02070-0100

36 yrs old, long, blonde hair blue eyes, 5'4", 125 lbs. Not into labels but considered butch. Very artistic. All around tom-boy that loves sports and my health. Very articulate intellect that can respect as well as admire dry wit. Great sense of humor — but very blunt — so look out. Have pictures

Deedee Pickler, W42391

VSPW P.O. Box 92 A4 141
Chowchilla, CA 93610-0092

33 yr old, BBM, looking for queens and other bi-men to write to. Need a friend 'cuz I am very lonely.

Larry DeVon Moore, W-56361

P.O. Box 43
Norfolk, MA 02056

BM seeking BM who wants to be made love to from his head to his toes, who can be passive as well as dominant. Between the ages of 25-33 yrs. Prefer handsome WM. If you are looking for life-time commitment, I am your guy!

Herman Hawkins

SCIS BU-5437
P.O. box 999, 1120 Pike St.
Huntington, PA 16652

Hot, Latino male, 30 yrs, 5'6", 180 lbs, athletic physique, pleasing to the eye. In search of feminine male/TS for honest friendship or fully-expressive loving relationship. I will promptly answer all letters. Your photo gets mine.

Vladimir Puentes

#95R1168
P.O. box 149
Attica, NY 14011

Lonely, lovable, romantic, intelligent, attractive, white male, 38 yrs, 6', 180 lbs, muscular build, seeks to correspond with anyone, age, looks, gender unimportant. Awaiting trial and US attorney is seeking death sentence. I have few ties to community and would love to hear from someone who knows what loneliness is all about. Honest, sincere and not out to play games. Wide variety of interests and enjoy learning.

David Hammer, 24507-077

P.O. Box 3000
White Deer, PA 17887-3000

50 yrs old, 6', 187 lbs, dark hair/eyes, educated. In search of "true friend". Age and gender not important. Hobbies include chess, reading horror and thriller novels, working out, and writing. Dominate personality but learning to tone it down. Highly loyal and faithful to those I love and friends.

Edward Timmons, 80D02328

Box 51
Constock, NY 12821

6'1", 180 lbs, very handsome GWM, seeking pen pals and possible relationship with other males. All letters answered.

Freddie Cox

#215042
P.O. Box 1000
Craigsville, VA 24430

Fit, energetic 43 yr old, 5'11", built, muscular from work-outs, versatile, loving, masculine, jail-house lawyer, poet, college educated. Looking for effeminate types who enjoy being honest and open-minded.

Chester Haas III

TDJC#327322
Route 1m, Box 150
Coffield Unit
Tennessee Colony, TX 75884

30 yr old, intelligent BM interested in acquiring stimulating conversations, perhaps more. Emotionally uninhibited, mentally open-minded, and physically fit.

Michael David Taylor

C-87324 BFB5/238 up
Pleasant Valley State Prison
P.O. Box 8502
Coalinga, CA 93210

Young, pretty boy, 25 yrs old. sandy brown hair, gray eyes, 147 lbs, 5'10". I'm in prison but I am not a bad boy. I'd like to hear from any interested white fellows, with photo, if possible.

Chick Mecer, #698663

Coffield Unit
Route 1, Box 150
Tenn, Colony, TX 75884

37 yr old, childless African American lesbian seeking sincere pen pal. I love people of all races and will communicate with loyalty to anyone interested in corresponding with me. A new friend would be a blessing in my life and greatly appreciated. My spirits are high, my heart is warm, and I believe that all women should possess a rage in them to be all they can be here on earth.

Kia K. Grasty, #OB-4450

451 Fullerton Avenue
Cambridge Springs, PA 16403-1238

26 yr old Celtic male, 5'10", 1780 lbs, dark brn hair/eyes. tattoos. In search of friends of many kinds. Looking for female and feminine friends in particular who'll stay in touch regularly. Cannot correspond with inmates.

James "Chris" Tompkins, #0409819

Odom Corr. Inst.
Route 1, Box 36
Jackson, NC 27845

GWM, 26, HIV neg, convict, seeks GWM 20-30 yrs old to write and possible relationship. Serious inquiries only. Will answer all letters.

Charles Stramham, EF-266511

Phillips State Prison
2989 W. Rock Quarry Rd.
Buford, GA 30518

SGM, 31, brown/blue 5'11", 185 lbs. Looking for a gay/bi pen-pal to ease the pain of a long prison sentence. No head games please.

Jerry Walker, #425020

P.O. Box 16
Lovelady, TX 75851

GWM, brown hair, blue eyes, 6', 180 lbs, seeking other GM. Age not important, only your friendship and letters. Will respond to all. Your photo gets mine. Sorry no inmates. I enjoy living life to the fullest.

John Finley, #625073

Route 4, Box 1100
Rosharon, TX 77583

GWM, 24, 6', 180 lbs, brown hair, hazel eyes, nice looking, HIV neg seeking honest mature caring older gentleman for friendship possible L.T.R.

Aaron Hall

P.O. Box 1111
Carlisle, IN 47838

I'd like to meet full-fledged TS's/TV's and lesbians my age and younger. I'm 39 and 6'1", 165 lbs, brown complexion, pleasing and dignified in form and in appearance.

Mark Rhodes, #183692

Jessup Pre Release Unit
P.O. Box 536
Jessup, MD 20794-0536

SWF, 120 lbs, bld hair. Playful. fun-loving, 28 yr old lady seeking a friendship with someone energetic, spirited enjoys firm bodies enjoys workouts and who has a lot of energy. Also bi. Send photo.

Michelle Kopke, 898316-C-3-11

Gadsen Correctional Inst.
P.O. Box 1769
Quincy, FL 32353

Hello out there. I am a 35 yr old GWM, looking to write to and be with someone who is gay. I am quiet, enjoy camping, late night movies, cooking, cleaning, mountain climbing, and having a good love life. I would love to hear from you gay guys out there.

Richard Nichols, #64084

A.S.P. S.M.U. - II
P.O. Box 3400
Florence, AZ 85232

GWM looking for correspondence. I am going to be down for many years to come and need moral support from gay community. I have brown, collar-length hair, bluish, gray eyes, good smile, and sense of humor. Looking for same of any age.

Rick Romanoski, #955280

IDOC
WVCF
P.O. Box 1111
Carlisle, IN 47838

23 SBM, 5'11", 180 lbs, seeks to correspond with intelligent, open-minded woman for friendship, maybe more. Race, age open. Photo optional.

Larry Tyson, Jr., #872614

P.O. Box 1111
Carlisle, IN 47838
BZ-101-E-SHLL

37 yr old lesbian would like to write to other women.

Joan Conyer, #007609

P.O. Box 180
Muncy, PA 17756

GWM, 28, kind, caring and loving. Spiritual individual. Political prisoner of homo-hating south and queer bashing rednecks. Part of sentence included 25 years for "crimes against nature." Looking for open, honest people to write. NO GAMES. I also write and sell gay erotic short stories. Hope to hear from you soon.

Joe Urbaniak

Johnston Correctional Center
2465 US 70 W
Smithfield, NC 27577

Incarcerated, WM. 31, 6', 250 lbs, dark hair, hazel eyes, attractive, affectionate, romantic, witty. College educated. Originally from Salem, MA; presently locked-down in OH. In search of friendship/companionship. Will answer all. Race not important.

Kurt Rotcavich, #R143-310

P.O. Box 56, Le.C.I. 1A20
Lebanon, OH 45036-0056

35 yr old, Bi male, 5'11", 165 lbs, black hair w/ silver highlights. Hazel eyes that frequently turn sky blue. Active, work out all the time when able. I love younger, very feminine men and younger, very masculine women.

Brad Alan Parrish

30 Administration Road
Bridgewater, MA 02324

Lesbian incarcerated in Florida would love to receive letters and info, from "real" people.

Melanie Atkins, #692120

Gadsen Correctional Institution
P.O. Box 1769-A236
Quincy, FL 32353

GWM, 42 yrs old, 6'2", 185 lbs, auburn-hzl, mustache, hairy chest. Good build. Likes cooking, cowboys, outdoors, music (esp. alternative), films and dancing. Am caring and understanding. Seeking pen pals for friendship and possibly more. Photo a +.

Chris Walker, #107596

AZ State Prison - Perryville
San Juan Unit
P.O. box 3300
Goodyear, AZ 85338-3300

An open-minded Native Cuban who is 38 yrs, light-skinned, and very caring, outgoing, sharing (versatile) searching for Mr. Right for deep soul discovery among other things.

Miguel Valdez, TDJC #604966

Route 1
Box 150
Coffield Unit
Tennessee Colony, TX 75884

The Prison-Industrial Complex

by Julie Netherland and Donna Kiefer

Since the advent of Ronald Reagan's War on Drugs, incarceration has become the answer to the complicated social problems of poverty, racism, sexual and physical abuse, crime, and drug and alcohol addiction. According to General Accounting Office figures, the number of people incarcerated in the United States more than tripled between 1980 and 1995, from 329,800 to 1.1 million. Current figures range from 1.25 million to 1.5 million. These increases are not the result of higher crime rates—on the contrary, after holding steady for many years, violent crime has actually decreased in the last several years. Rather, they are due to state and federal legislation passed to get "tough on crime:" the lessening or outright abolition of parole; mandatory minimum sentences, that prohibit suspended sentences and probation; and "three strikes" laws.

For people of color and women, the rate of incarceration has increased even more sharply than among the general population. Since 1980, the number of women in prison has increased about 500 percent, due mainly to mandatory minimum sentencing for drug-related crimes. In 1991, according to a report of the Bureau of Justice Statistics, one of three female prisoners was incarcerated for a drug offense. This same report found that almost half of the women serving time were in prison for non-violent crimes. According to the Sentencing Project of the US Department of Justice, nearly one in

three African American males between the ages of 20 and 29 are incarcerated or on probation or parole. A report by the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice on the effects of California's highly praised "three strikes" law found that African Americans were being incarcerated at a rate thirteen times that of whites. Eight-five percent of those convicted under the law were nonviolent offenders. There are no statistics on the number of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people in prison, but one can surmise that their numbers have also been increasing.

Who Profits From Prison Policies?

Along with this growth in the number of prisoners has come an enormous increase in overall prison expenditures. The corrections industry is the growth industry of the 1990's. According to the GAO, in 1980 the country spent \$3.1 billion on its prisons. In 1994, it spent \$17.7 billion. Between 1994 and 1995, state agencies alone spent \$5.1 billion on new prison construction. During Governor William Weld's tenure in Massachusetts, corrections spending has been the state's fastest growing budget item. There is no doubt about it—locking people up is big business.

As expenditures on prisons have increased, political and corporate leaders have devised creative ways to recoup or decrease the costs of incarceration. Not surprisingly, these strategies have profited corporations

and politicians, while worsening prison conditions and further abridging the rights of prisoners.

Privatization is one strategy employed by correctional facilities to decrease costs. Some prisons privatize specific programs, such as health care, while other prisons are run completely by private companies. The Louisiana-based Correctional Corporation of America is the largest such business. In 1993, it earned profits of \$4 million. Some states, like Texas, are investing heavily in prison expansion and then marketing their prison services to other states. In 1996 and 1997, Governor Weld ordered several hundred Massachusetts prisoners sent to Texas prisons to ease over-crowding and because Texas could incarcerate prisoners for half the cost of what Massachusetts was spending. Complaints from prisoners, their families, and prisoner advocates about severing community and family ties and about harsh conditions in the Texas prisons went unheeded.

The newest fad in the prison industry, heralded as the solution to rising prison costs, is prison work programs in which prisoners are employed by private companies. Both government-run and privately-run prisons are teaming up with corporations to capitalize on what one CEO has unabashedly called a "captive labor force." Indeed, the potential for profit is remarkable when one considers that in some states private companies are receiving tax breaks to use prison labor and that these employers do not have to pay health insurance, vacation or sick leave. Some companies also save on the cost of leasing space because the work is performed at the prison itself. As if all of these benefits were not incentive enough, in some states, companies and prison-run

Gay Community News

Off-the-Page Series for Spring 1997

The Bromfield Street Educational Foundation proudly presents a reading series featuring lesbian and gay fiction writers:

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 11

Blanche McCrary Boyd

The author of the acclaimed *THE REVOLUTION OF LITTLE GIRLS* now drives deep into the heart of the revolution itself, from the vantage point of the radical feminist underground in the days of rage. Combining Boyd's trademark wisdom, heart, and wit, *TERMINAL VELOCITY* (Knopf) follows a young Boston woman as she moves to California, changes her name to Rain, and contends with the psychic difficulties of reinventing herself.

Benjamin Taylor

"A winning, eccentric novel," said the Village Voice of Benjamin Taylor's lyrical, elegant debut, *TALES OUT OF SCHOOL* (Warner). Set in the sultry summer of 1907 in Galveston, Texas, the book is the saga of the Jewish Mehmel family, especially 14-year-old Felix and his seduction by a rough, handsome bully. "One of the great novels of the decade," said London's *Gay Times*. "If you have to, steal a copy."

**All readings take place at 7:00 PM ★ The Living Center, 29 Stanhope Street, Boston (near Hard Rock Cafe)
★ ADMISSION IS FREE ★**

This program sponsored in part by a grant from the Boston Council for the Arts. Books on sale at events courtesy of We Think the World of You Bookstore.

industries are allowed to pay below minimum wage. In Massachusetts, prisoners were paid \$1.00 an hour to make license plates. In Colorado, AT&T paid inmate telemarketers \$2.00 an hour. Even in those states where wages are at or above the minimum, they are still low in comparison to wages on the outside. In Indiana, a telemarketing company pays prisoners \$5.00 an hour to do a job that a unionized employee would be paid \$18.00 an hour to do. Not surprisingly, labor unions have spoken out against the use of prison labor. We are creating a union-free, strike-free work force or, in the words of one prison advocate, "a slave labor force."

At the same time that correctional facilities are offering incentives to businesses to use prison labor, they are applying financial pressure on prisoners to compel them to work. It has become increasingly commonplace for prisons to charge inmates for rent, toiletries, and even health care. Of the money earned by prison laborers, the prisoner receives, on average, about 20 percent. The remainder is garnished by state governments or private prison managers, mostly for room and board, and for taxes and victim restitution.

Short Sighted Policies - Long Term Effects

While corporations, state agencies, and politicians are profiting from these new prison policies, it is our communities which will ultimately pay the price. Overcrowding, privatization, prison labor programs, and prisoner repayment programs have worsened already deplorable prison conditions. Privatized service in many states means less service, and increased incarceration means over-crowding, more lock-downs, and fewer educational and rehabilitative programs. Most of the over one million people currently incarcerated in US prisons under these condition will eventually be released. As a result of current policies, these people will come out of prison uneducated, unemployable, poor, disconnected from family and community, politically disenfranchised, stigmatized as ex-cons, with their mental health and substance abuse problems unrecognized and untreated, and angry. Increasing the arrest rate and expanding prisons should not be touted as a solution to crime. It should be seen for what it is—a sign of our failure to deal effectively with larger issues.

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